New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 9

The world has been destroyed.

Othinus's rule has been achieved.

Sargasso, the combat stage and Gremlin's base which floats in Tokyo Bay, has vanished. In fact, the entire world has completely disappeared. Naturally, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Lessar, and Birdway have also disappeared.

Only Kamijou Touma remains in a black space of unified darkness. There is a single reason for this: his right hand is a reference point and restoration point for the world.

Othinus, who has become a god, no longer has even the slightest interest in Kamijou Touma. There is not the slightest possibility of making a comeback like he always does.

That is the sort of world this is.

And…

And…

And…

This is the story that will crush Kamijou Touma's heart.

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新約 とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）⑨

鎌池和馬

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Kamachi Kazuma

I am wondering if I can use a trick that casually includes the effective symbolism of a small fence or railing. Like iron bars or a bird cage. I wonder if that would provide a trapped feeling without mentioning it in the text.

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The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village 1~3
A Simple Survey
A Simple Monitoring
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

新約

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インデックス

9

鎌池和馬

イラスト／

はいむらきよたか

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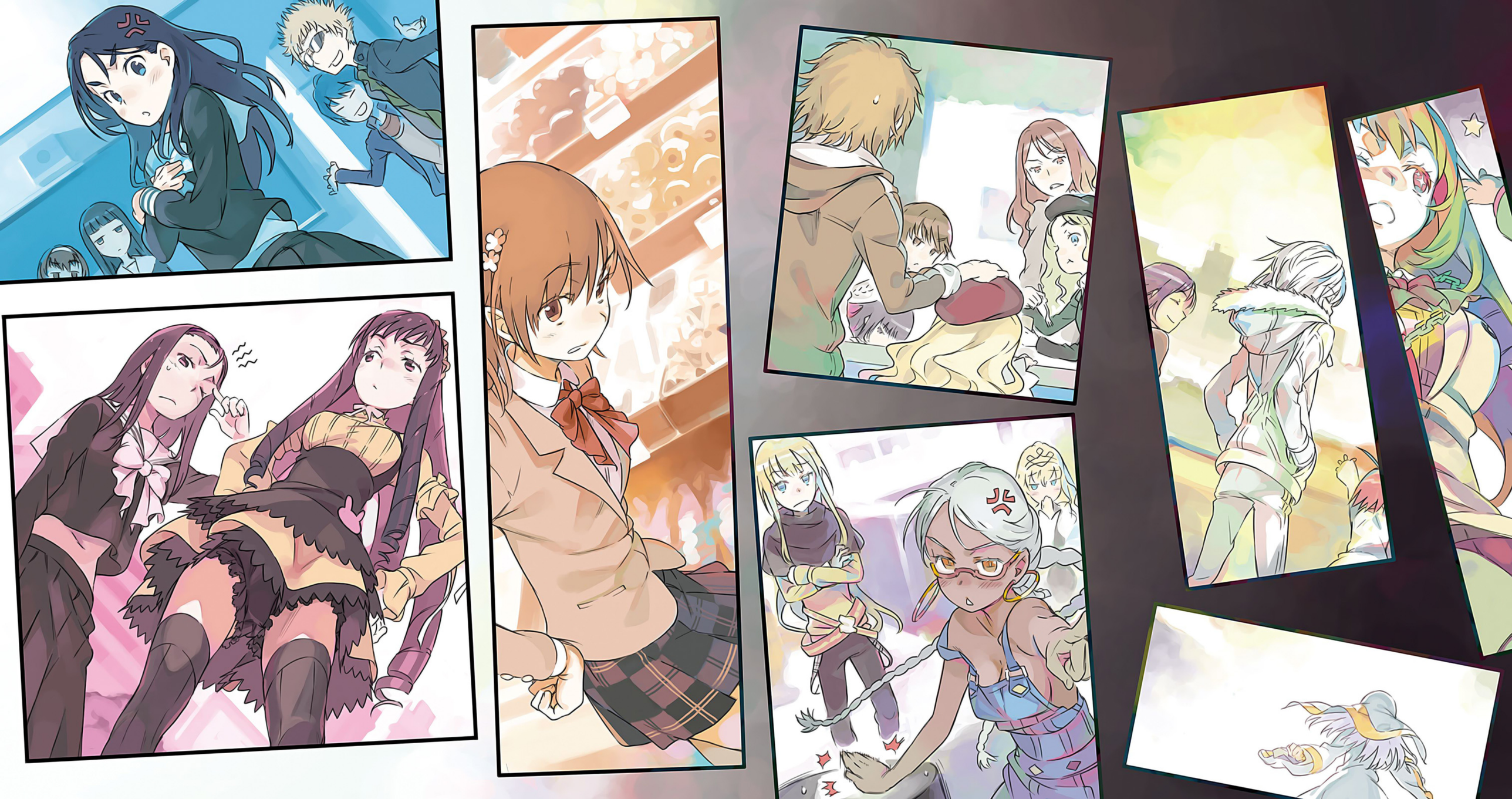
"Gungnir"

A spiritual item used to control a Magic God's power. After gathering massive volcanic energy in Hawaii, performing an experiment in holistic esper development in Baggage City, and securing an actual human specimen in Academy City, it was ultimately completed in Sargasso by the Dvergr named Marian.

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)



TOARU MAJUTSU NO INDEX NEW TESTAMENT

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

9

KAMACHI KAZUMA
鎌池和馬
イラスト・はいむらきよたか
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PROLOGUE

The End of a Certain World.

Game_Over.

In the UN headquarters at New York, United States President Roberto Katze spoke before the gathered national leaders.

“Our allied forces will perform a joint attack on Gremlin’s headquarters of Sargasso. Everything will be decided by our ability to find the enemy and work together. After all, it seems the Magic God’s lance will be completed in another twelve hours. Once that happens, there’s no way we can win. And that goes for all six billion people on Earth.”

♦

The man who should have become a Magic God, Ollerus, had infiltrated Sargasso while disguised as Lightning God Thor.

(Now, then. It’s about time I took action.)

♦

After arriving in Japan’s Academy City, Leivinia Birdway spoke to Kamijou Touma.

“This is our last chance. I do not think you can defeat Magic God Othinus. But if we throw you into the middle of her delicate work, you might be able to stop the production of the lance. You could say your role is similar to a precision guided bomb being dropped from the sky.”

♦

Queen Regnant Elizard responded to her subordinate while taking part in the meeting of heads of state.

“Here’s my guess: Sargasso is in the North Sea or the sea near Iceland.”

♦

A British unit containing Second British Princess Carissa, Knight Leader, and Mercenary William Orwell began a preemptive attack against Sargasso where it floated in the North Sea. There, they met an old man in a tailcoat who called himself Loki.

“I have splendidly deceived my powerful enemies! This may only buy a small amount of time, but that time can influence the direction in which the world is headed!!”

♦

When Birdway received word, she grimaced.

“The real Sargasso is in Tokyo Bay!?”

♦

Academy City existed on the western side of Tokyo. Sargasso floated in Tokyo Bay on the eastern side of Tokyo. If the two clashed, the 23 special wards would become a battlefield. To stop it, Gremlin had to be crushed before they could truly begin their attack.

Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Leivinia Birdway, Lessar, and Kumokawa Maria boarded the same supersonic passenger plane for their individual reasons.

But they did not arrive at Tokyo Bay.

Just as they left Academy City airspace and passed over Shinjuku, a mysterious creature resembling a dragon attacked them and their plane exploded in midair. They used parachutes to land but were scattered in the process.

“For now, we can only head for Sargasso. That is the goal where we can all meet up!!”

♦

Every road was congested and all transportation was paralyzed, so Kamijou’s method of travelling quickly was to jump on top of a subway train.

However, a Gremlin magician named Freyja appeared before him.

“I purposefully left this hole open to lure in a powerful enemy, and it looks like I ended up with exactly the card I expected. The fertility goddess Freyja will be your opponent☆”

♦

With the help of Index and Mikoto, Kamijou somehow managed to defeat Freyja and once more set out for Tokyo Bay. He was attacked by Gremlin’s defense mechanism named Níðhöggr, but it was defeated by Kihara Kagun.

Kumokawa Maria said the following.

“I will remain here. Even if he is already dead, at least one person needs to go along with his selfishness.”

♦

At Sargasso, Ollerus and Fiamma of the Right used their anti-Magic God spell on Othinus.

That spell was meant to shrink a Magic God down to the level of a fairy and it succeeded, but Othinus remained calm.

“It could be either success or failure, so you have given me the chance I needed to become a complete Magic God. Your desperate strategy has merely given me what I needed.”

♦

When Kamijou and the others finally arrived at Sargasso, Othinus was waiting for them. She pulled the lance from behind her eyepatch and spoke.

“Marian Slingeneyer and Gremlin were mere decoys. If you knew I alone was creating the lance, there was a chance that attempt would be hindered.”

♦

Kamijou tried to deny Othinus’s words in an attempt to look away from the hopeless situation, but Othinus’s reply was one of disinterest.

“These small fights are such a pain. I think I’ll just end the world.”

♦

Immediately afterwards, everything in the world was truly and seriously destroyed.

CHAPTER 5

Further than the Farthest Reaches.

Point_Unknown.

Part 1

"You have failed."

Magic God Othinus's voice slipped into Kamijou Touma's ears.

Initially, he was unable to grasp the all too strange and hopeless situation.

"You have failed and this is the result. I am honestly not interested in what you will do now, but this is reality. It is boring and ultimately nothing leaves one's expectations."

"..."

Kamijou finally realized he was lying on his back.

Once he sprang to his feet, he was left speechless. Everything around him was odd. It was black. Nothing but black. The ground was perfectly flat. It was even more level and free of defect than the silicon wafer for a semiconductor. From where he stood to the horizon, the ground did not rise or fall by even a micron.

"What is this place?"

Nothing natural could be seen. Nothing unnatural could be seen.

Despite the previous use of the word, it was unclear whether the term "horizon" even applied. Both the ground and the sky were colored pure black, so it was impossible to distinguish between them.

He turned around a full 360 degrees, but the scenery did not change. He stopped at the spot he thought he had started at, but he was not even sure that was correct. With nothing to use as a landmark, he could not be sure.

He could, however, see a blonde-haired, green-eyed girl.

One of those eyes was covered with a leather eyepatch and she held a lance.

The uniform world of darkness emphasized her golden hair and white skin like the full moon.

A strange sense of reality gradually assaulted Kamijou's heart.

He had never before felt such hostility and rejection toward a feeling of reality.

"What is this? I thought we were in Tokyo Bay. We were in Gremlin's headquarters of Sargasso!!"

"What? *Does this look like some other place to you?*"

"Wait a second..."

The Magic God seemed oddly close.

Compared to when he had chased her to the other side of the world in Eastern Europe's Baggage City, she seemed so much closer.

But she also seemed distant.

He had never been so far from understanding this eyepatch-wearing girl.

In that sense, she seemed further than the ends of the earth.

"This isn't Sargasso. You carried me somewhere else while I was unconscious. That's the truth of what happened! After all! Um... After all!! Anything else would be a major problem!!"

"Why do you think the world revolves around your convenience?"

"Then what happened to Sargasso!? What happened to Tokyo Bay!?"

"*Does it look like any of it remains?*"

"Then what happened to the people there!? What happened to Index!? Or Misaka!? Or Lessar and Birdway!? A-and not just them! What about all the people living in Tokyo!?"

"*Do I look like someone who would care about that?*"

"....."

His understanding of what lay before him crumbled.

He forgot how to produce anger or sorrow.

Such things had been so natural that he had never before thought about the process.

But his mind was in such disarray that he no longer understood how his own heart functioned.

“You’re lying...”

“How long are you going to keep talking?”

“You’re lying!! You, um, used some kind of trick to make it look like that’s what happened!! That would be easier. Instead of destroying Tokyo Bay and killing all those people, it would be easier to bring me to some other place!! So...!!”

“It no longer matters how you perceive the situation. Who it was that disappeared is a trivial matter. The problem that lies before you is that only the two of us are here,” said Othinus disinterestedly. She sounded like someone who had downloaded an app to kill time late at night but found out it was even more boring than expected. “And you seem confused as to the scale we are talking about.”

“What? Are you saying there’s more?”

“Why are you talking about this on the tiny scale of Tokyo Bay? What I destroyed is not contained to just the small planet known as Earth.”

Kamijou Touma laughed.

He could not help but laugh. He completely gave up trying to grasp the situation. All of his emotions came to an end. He had no idea what emotion his expression was based in. It may have been the expression of a marionette after its strings had been cut. Even the expressionless look people considered neutral may have been partially regulated by the facial muscles controlled by that person’s will.

It did not matter.

He would gain nothing by speaking with Magic God Othinus any longer.

He could not have a proper conversation with her.

She was lying. She had to be lying. He could not bear to think about the alternative.

He simply had to check on the situation himself.

That would bring an end to this farce.

“Ha ha. If you want to see it that badly, go right ahead. But you do not have to see it. In fact, you might be happier if you don’t see it.”

Othinus’s mocking voice struck his back.

He had no intention of responding.

He began walking unsteadily through that uniformly black world. He was turning his back to someone as powerful as Othinus, but he was no longer able to feel any direct threat to his life.

“Index,” he muttered.

There were no hills, structures, or objects that could hide someone.

If someone was standing there, he would have seen them right away.

“Misaka.”

There were no mountains, no valleys, no oceans, no rivers, no sun, and no moon.

As he walked and walked and walked and walked and walked, he found nothing but the same level ground. He called out several names, but they disappeared into the darkness as if being swallowed up.

“Lessar! Birdway!!”

They were not there.

They were not anywhere.

The truth picked up by his senses was all too clear, but it took his mind a long, long time to understand it. He refused to accept that truth, so he rejected the idea with all his might.

There had to be something somewhere.

There might be a valley somewhere in that world of uniform black. They might all be hiding there and he simply could not see it from such a distance. Surely that was the case. It had to be the case. While keeping that thought in mind, Kamijou Touma accepted his baseless speculation as fact and continued walking.

And...

And...

And...

Part 2

...

.....

.....

Time had passed. By the time Kamijou realized that, he could not remember how long he had been walking. There was no sun or moon to judge time by. There were not even stars. He was surrounded by a pitch black dome. He may have only been walking for half an hour or so, but he might have been walking for three days and three nights.

Whatever the case, that was when his mind reached some kind of critical juncture. One could say the thin thread of his tension had snapped.

There was no one there.

There was no one anywhere.

He could not find a single person.

“Ah...ahh....”

And where was he?

Sargasso could not possibly be this large. Walking in a single direction should have brought him to the ocean eventually, but nothing changed no matter how far he walked. The ocean had vanished. It was like a passage from a picture book meant to provide children with an odd philosophical feeling. Had he really wandered into such an absurd and surreal world?

Or had the world been changed to take this form?

“Ahhhhh.”

Where am I?

For the first time, Kamijou Touma properly asked that question.

And once he did, it was all over. A great pressure squeezed at his heart from every direction. He stood on a black plain that did not change in height by even a micron. The sky was equally black and provided no landmark to follow. There was nothing he could use to judge where it was he stood. He might have been walking in an accurate line like a machine or he might have been circling around in a narrow area. He had no way of proving

it one way or the other. He could feel that which supported his feet and his mind crumbling underneath him.

“Ahhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

He was alone.

He was all alone in this vast world with nothing in it.

His mental state was similar to someone exploring some ancient ruins and finding their thread leading to the exit had snapped.

Strength left his legs.

He collapsed to the ground and curled up in the fetal position.

He screamed as loudly as he could.

In a world this distorted, the concept of being lost or not knowing how to return may not have applied. The scenery may have looked exactly the same no matter what coordinates he stood at. Even so, he was afraid. He was unbearably afraid. He was afraid of being unable to return to a location that remained only in his head. He was afraid of having no way to meet the people he had previously spoken with like it was nothing. He had never known this kind of fear existed. He had never thought about the possibility of experiencing this kind of fear.

He had thought about the possibility of dying someday.

But this was different.

It was the polar opposite.

This was the fear of him alone living on.

This was the fear of everything but him disappearing.

He had not built up a resistance to this kind of fear. It was wrong to have ever done so. This was something that should never have happened. Among all the different possibilities, this was the absolute worst. Kamijou Touma was thrown into this situation that should never be experienced even once.

By the time he reached the question of what to do, his thoughts ground to a halt.

This world had nothing to indicate what to do.

He could circle in all 360 degrees and find nothing in this world.

Say the main character of an RPG is standing in a field. He can walk to the north, south, east, or west. He walks for an hour or even a day, but does not find any villages or towns. He does not find anyone. Whether he continues on or turns back, the same field continues on and on forever. ...What was someone supposed to do in that situation? Could anyone really consider continuing on and going along with the wishes of whoever had created the hopeless situation?

That was why Kamijou's heart ached for some kind of indicator.

It could be a small village, a bridge over a river, or a conveniently placed sign.

He just wanted some kind of landmark.

"...There is one," he muttered.

He straightened out from the fetal position and unsteadily stood back up.

It appeared in his mind once more.

The option he had completely rejected appeared in his mind once more.

A single foreign element shined like the full moon in that dark world.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

"There's still Othinus, the source of all this."

Part 3

He may have been approaching the heart of the issue.

Or he may have been trying to escape the reality he faced.

Either way, Kamijou Touma began to walk once more. He walked back the way he had come so he could meet with Magic God Othinus once more.

Once his stalled mind began to move, question after question came to him.

Each and every one of them weighed hopelessly heavily on his mind, but he could not advance if he ignored them.

And more importantly, all of the answers connected back to that Magic God.

With nothing to use as a landmark, he was not confident he was headed in the right direction. Nor did he know how far he had to walk.

Even so, he continued on.

He walked.

“Oh?” said Othinus casually.

The tip of her lance was stabbed into the black ground and she was leaning against the handle. She continued speaking lazily.

“And here I thought you had *broken* and collapsed to die out in the middle of nowhere.”

Kamijou did not respond.

Just like her, he said only what he wanted to say.

“There was nothing here.”

“I told you that at the beginning.”

“But this isn’t the end.”

Magic God Othinus straightened up from the lance sticking vertically up from the ground.

Her one eye narrowed slightly, but Kamijou continued.

“There has to be some way of returning this world to normal. There has to be a way of meeting the people who have disappeared!!”

“Are we back to your special brand of optimism? I was wondering how you managed to overcome seeing the end of the world, but it looks like you simply deluded yourself.” Othinus shrugged. “Listen. The world has ended. It does not matter how. It is gone. Your right hand can negate magical flames and you might be able to protect yourself from them, but can it revert something that has been burned to ashes? This is no different. The world has ended, so there is nothing you can do.”

“Really?” asked Kamijou. “According to Ollerus, Imagine Breaker was created from the selfish hopes of all magicians. He said it is a reference point and restoration point they can use if they have twisted the world to the point that they don’t know how to fix it.”

“…”

“And that is exactly what has happened here.”

He formed a fist and held out his right hand.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking and I may not even be able to understand it, but none of that matters. ...I will crush all that here. I will find a way to revert everything you threw out of order. I have the tool needed to do it.”

“Fine then,” said Othinus simply and quickly. “To be honest, I had thought you would be the final barrier. Specifically, your right hand and wrist. Imagine Breaker takes on different forms depending on the era and location. You are literally trash, but killing you and having it reside somewhere else could be a problem.”

“...?”

“And so.” Othinus paused for a beat before continuing. “Rather than smashing every last bit of you to pieces, it would be better to break you mentally. I will use you as a cage to trap Imagine Breaker. That power of yours will be completely useless.”

“Bring it on. Either way, we’re the only ones here. Even if I’m at a disadvantage and even if this is reckless, I can’t rely on anyone or anything else right now.”

“Me? Fight you?” She frowned and even tilted her head. “It may be hard to believe, but I am a god. Do you really think the great Othinus would bother to fight a puny human?”

She grabbed the handle of the lance she had previously been leaning up against.

She pulled the tip out of the black ground.

“A Magic God does not need to do anything directly to crush a single kid. Have you forgotten? A Magic God is one who can manipulate anything in the world using magic. Everything is under my control. Any annoying bit of work can be left to my pawns.”

It glowed.

The spear gave off light in that world filled with nothing but darkness.

This was a clear change.

Or perhaps it was a sign of creation.

“What are you doing?”

“I already told you. I am breaking you mentally.”

Magic God Othinus’s tone was perfectly casual.

She looked at him as if watching a death row inmate being carried along the conveyer belt of a fully automated execution device.

“I will take that which you wanted to protect, the places you wanted to return to, the faces you wanted to see once more, and everything else. I will fundamentally overturn them and destroy your recognition of them. I will show you the insignificance of everything you have gained in your fifteen or so years of life.”

As soon as she finished speaking, the entire world was dyed white.

It was not that his vision was being filled with bright light. He was not being blinded. The empty world of darkness was now shining. It was changing. Starting from the lance, everything was obeying the Magic God’s will.

Something was happening.

Between the Lines 4

Small scratches had been made in that empty place.

Straight scratches had been made with someone’s fingernail.

Did they count the passage of time or the number of times someone had passed by there? The person could no longer remember.

But that number that slowly grew provided a slight sense of accomplishment.

It had no meaning, but it provided support.

One time the person passed by that place, the scratches had disappeared.

Thinking they were in the wrong place, the person had walked around that world of uniform black, but they had not found the scratches.

The person had wanted something definite.

They had wanted something unchanging to support them.

Even if it was completely natural, they knew this was a difficult wish to grant. People aged and things broke. Food rotted and metal rusted. Towns changed and cultures were twisted. Not even nations and civilizations stayed the same forever. Even if they were not in this black world, finding something that truly did not change would have been extremely difficult.

Even so, they wished for it.

They wished for it specifically because everything had come to an end.

There was a lot to do. Where had the missing people gone? Could replacements be made for the lost buildings? Could food and water be found in this urgent situation?

There may have been no direct link between those objectives and something that did not change.

But the presence or absence of such a thing would make all the difference.

It would be different from a collection of tiny scratches that could disappear at any time.

There was something in that world of black that would count.

Having something definite like that would have meaning.

And so...

CHAPTER 6

Shifting and Fluctuating World.

Version_Alpha.

Part 1

"...Ah!?"

Kamijou awoke.

He did not know where he was or have any memories of what had just happened. He was lying on a cheap bed. He did not recognize anything. He did not know exactly where he was, but he thought it might be a ready-built house in a residential district. He was in a square space that resembled a small bedroom. A small penguin doll sat on a shelf on the wall.

There was a good reason he was not sure about what this place was.

The room had no roof.

The wall bordering the outside had completely crumbled.

A burning smell reached his nose within the rubble-strewn room.

The stars glittering in the sky above suggested it was night, but the scenery past the broken wall seemed oddly bright. A faint orange light seemed to shine from beyond the horizon.

(What was that world of nothing but black? Was it a dream?)

Nothing was clear.

He had no confidence one way or the other.

His situation lying in this destroyed house did not seem real. If he was asked whether his previous experience or this current one was a dream, he would not have an answer.

(Where is this anyway? Where is Gremlin? Or Sargasso? Academy City is filled with student dorms, so I'm not there. Is this somewhere in the 23 special wards of Tokyo?)

The only possibility he could think of was that he lost consciousness during his confrontation with Magic God Othinus at Sargasso in Tokyo Bay.

He had no memory of it, but given the situation, he doubted it had been successful.

Index, Misaka Mikoto, Lessar, and Birdway had headed to Sargasso with him, so one of them had likely taken him with them when they withdrew. If so, the person who had brought him here was likely nearby. Staying put until they returned would be better than wandering randomly.

.....Or would it be?

Unpleasant sweat poured from his face.

There was no way he had made it all the way here from Tokyo Bay on his own. As his enemy, no one from Gremlin would have considerately laid him on a bed after he fell unconscious. A stranger would have no reason to suddenly intervene. In that case, it was most natural to assume one of the people travelling with him had carried him. He had no reason to doubt that conclusion.

Nevertheless, an intense feeling of rejection came over him as he tried to take that easy way out.

It was like pitching a tent over where old and rusted unexploded ordnance was buried and being told to rest there because it was safe.

He felt as if he were ignoring a precondition that he could not afford to overlook.

He heard a staticky noise.

While surrounded by an odd burning smell as if someone had failed making dinner, a pale white light appeared to his side.

He looked over and saw a rectangular light.

It was an LCD TV.

It seemed to have turned itself on somehow.

The news came on.

A female Japanese announcer in a suit was reporting on what looked like a war in a distant country. The nighttime cityscape behind her was undergoing a complete blackout, so none of the usual city lights were visible. Even so, the silhouettes of the buildings were still vaguely visible because of the orange flames burning here and there.

“Wait...” muttered Kamijou.

Just like a piece of trick art that holds a different meaning when flipped upside down, he finally realized what was truly being shown on the TV screen.

“Wait! I know where that is!!”

A horrible feeling began at the tips of his fingers and rushed deep into the core of his body.

The female announcer’s voice finally entered his ears.

“The international coalition army is continuing its joint invasion of Japan’s capital city of Tokyo in order to eliminate Kamijou Touma who is hiding within the city. We have word that seventy percent of the 23 special wards in the heart of the city have already been reduced to rubble, but there are concerns that the large-scale destruction will leave doubt as to whether Kamijou Touma is actually dead.”

.....

He had no idea what this meant.

From what Leivinia Birdway had told him, it seemed the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the United States of America, France, and other powers had joined together to attack Gremlin’s headquarters. The true Sargasso had been in Tokyo Bay, so it was possible they had fought Magic God Othinus and the rest of Gremlin.

But how did that lead to this news report?

He stared blankly at the news which seemed even more cut off from reality than a war in a distant country.

It sounded like a bad joke, but then he remembered the burning smell.

And this strange house’s roof and wall had been destroyed.

He stiffly turned his head and once more looked out at the city through the bedroom’s destroyed wall.

Orange light flickered there, but they were not city lights.

The entire city was undergoing a blackout.

The lights he saw burning were massive flames which had been set to burn someone to death.

"..."

The broadcast cut to different footage.

It looked like a press conference and countless camera flashes lit up the man standing in the center.

United States President Roberto Katze puffed up his chest and spoke.

"I will skip all the unnecessary details. For one thing, we all know there was no room for argument. The Japanese government may have admitted Kamijou Touma is hiding in their country, but they have hidden this fact for a long time. That is an insult to the people of all nations who wish for a stable and peaceful international society."

"Wh-what?"

Kamijou spoke his question aloud despite no one being around to hear it.

That familiar face was speaking with an unfamiliar expression.

"We are forcing great hardship on the people of Japan, especially those who live in the city center. That is an undeniable fact, but we cannot end this onslaught until we have definite and undeniable proof of Kamijou Touma's death. Even those of you who insist on pacifism must understand deep down. For true peace, we must slay that demon now!!"

The translated voice speaking over the president's actual voice spoke oddly calmly when compared to his actual expression and tone. What he was doing was little different from reading off a list of those who were to be shot.

"Even if opinions are split in the present, historians a century from now will surely applaud our decision. If Kamijou Touma is allowed to escape and once more disappear into this wide world, nothing but rubble and corpses will remain in a century!! In accordance with the goodness of all mankind, we will make sure to bring his life to an end!!"

A deluge of applause followed.

Kamijou felt lost as he watched the world respond enthusiastically to the president's speech. He began to wonder if they would shed tears at an announcement of 98 yen cartons of eggs (1 per person) as long as it was given the label of "presidential speech".

He did not even know where to begin.

In a sinking boat, anyone would know to plug up the hole in the bottom of the boat. But the number of holes was simply too great. He was not even calm enough to think about plugging them each in order, so he could only watch the destructive scene play out.

And as a result, he averted his gaze from the "truth" and tried to gain peace of mind by overturning the original assumptions.

(Is this a type of information warfare? Are they trying to trick Gremlin to lead them somewhere? I can't think of any other reason to give the world such mistaken information.)

But his thoughts were interrupted.

"Hi there."

A new voice suddenly slipped into the destroyed bedroom.

His shoulders jumped and he turned around. He found a girl folding her arms and leaning against the wall.

She wore a witch-like hat and cape, leather clothes bound her body, and one eye was covered by an eyepatch. All of those things gave certain symbols to this person's silhouette.

No. She may not have fallen within the category of "person".

"Magic God Othinus!?"

"The world has heated up nicely."

That girl who stood in the territory of a god was spinning the TV remote in her hand. She randomly flipped through the channels. She looked like someone killing time during their spare time after dinner, but every single channel showed shocking footage that threatened to squeeze Kamijou's heart until it bursted.

One channel showed the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church speaking to a crowd in front of a solemn sanctuary.

"Please, everyone. Lift up your prayers for this day. God respects man's free will, but we must not naively support people's mistakes. Mistakes must be corrected. The one named Kamijou Touma is a stagnation created by misusing the freedom man has been given. Our ability to purify ourselves is being tested."

Another channel showed the Queen Regnant sitting in a palace parlor and speaking with someone from the TV station.

“It is an extremely unique situation, but we should fight here because our honor is at stake. It is quite rare to see evil on this level these days. Recently, even mafias and gangs have been speaking of good. We are honored to carry out the role of a modern day dragon slayer.”

“It looks like their engine has finished warming up,” said Othinus. “The world is boiling over. They have realized this great commotion will never end unless they find the head of Kamijou Touma in the rubble. I am a little surprised that no one has attempted to use nukes despite the extreme situation. Perhaps that is because they want to confirm your death after the fact.”

“What did...you do?” Kamijou somehow managed to move his trembling lips and speak. His voice quickly grew to a shout. “What did you do to them!? I don’t see why they would ever stop targeting you!”

“Oh, come on. Do you think I threatened them and gave them a wanted poster? No one would go along with that. They would refuse and I would have to take their pitiful lives. Surely you understand that.”

“...”

“Also, the continuity of the world no longer matters. The world truly came to an end. Sigh... I went out of my way to show you, so please don’t tell me you have already forgotten. This is not a nightmare you will eventually wake up from and it is not a meaningless illusion. This is the current world. I am a god and I made it this way. You can delude yourself if you like, but only one fate awaits you if you refuse to deal with the reality before you.”

The Magic God shrugged while still leaning against the wall.

“You will die. At this rate, nothing will change that.”

Bright light shined in from outside.

It seemed to belong to a powerful flashlight.

Kamijou looked around the destroyed bedroom while half-blinded, but Othinus was nowhere to be found.

In her place, he heard multiple violent-sounding voices from outside.

“Hey, I heard a TV in there, but it can’t have been a 1seg TV for disasters. To preserve the battery, they don’t let you turn the volume up that loud.”

“But the power is out over the entire area. No one can run a giant TV.”

“They must be using some kind of trick. Someone might be living here in secret. Let’s check it out. It might be *him*.”

Unpleasant sweat poured from Kamijou’s entire body.

He was pretty sure the destroyed bedroom was on the second floor of the house, but he could still hear the loud noises of someone entering the house. And those sounds were not that of a clattering doorknob, the door being kicked down, or anything else he would have expected.

They immediately broke a window.

The high-pitched noise stabbed into his eardrums.

“...!?”

These people were not operating under the normal rules.

But did that only apply to this angry group that was breaking into someone else’s house?

It was odd enough that the city was burning.

Where had the owner of the house gone? Was the owner of the penguin doll in the bedroom safe?

But all of that had to come after he escaped safely.

Whether it was these people who were crazy or the entire era, he doubted he could have a proper conversation with people who did not hesitate to break someone’s window. And Othinus seemed to have done something because even the people on the TV had been acting strangely. He did not know who these people were, but he doubted anything good would come of meeting them.

He focused his thoughts on surviving.

(A small house like this will only have one staircase. If I try to leave normally, I will run across these people. Escaping along the quickest route would have the opposite effect. However I ultimately escape, I need to wait this out. It’s the only way.)

He instinctually turned toward the destroyed bedroom’s door. It had no lock. He could use the chair and other objects in the room to keep the door from opening, but that would have the opposite effect. The intruding group would certainly look through every room. If one of the doors refused to open, it was obvious what they would think.

(Where can I hide? Under the bed? In the closet? No. The safer a spot I choose, the more likely they are to check there. I need somewhere that barely counts as a hiding spot. I need to hide behind the opened door or something equally suicidal. Those spots will escape their expectations and act as a mental blind spot.)

He heard footsteps beyond the thin floor.

He let out a long breath and tried to control his nerves.

(The exits are the door and...the broken wall.)

While making sure not to make any noise, he walked from the bed to the wall. The wall did not simply have a large hole in it; the entire wall was gone. It looked like multiple rooms had originally been connected by a metal balcony, but the supports had vanished along with the outer wall. The scraps that remained of the metal balcony could be seen on the torn-up ground that had originally been a yard.

The ground below was dirt. He would likely survive jumping down from the second story, but the remains of the wall and balcony were in the way. Also, if he injured his ankle when he landed, the men in the house were more likely to catch up to him.

(Can I make a rope? The remains of the curtains could work. Once they check here and begin searching the rest of the second floor, I can climb down from where the balcony was. As long as they don't have a bow gun or normal gun, I should be able to escape.)

After deciding on a general plan, Kamijou pressed against the wall so he could hide behind the opened door.

(I need to meet up with Index, Misaka, or someone else who knows what's going on.)

But he had been too naïve.

He realized this once the footsteps on the first floor never came to the second floor.

He also began to detect a burning smell.

A burning smell had been filling the area for a while, but this one was much stronger.

When he heard a crackling noise, he finally caught on to just how urgent the situation was.

(Th-they weren't trying to search through the house! They were setting fire to it to smoke out anyone inside!)

His expectations meant nothing.

The idea that this sort of thing was normal was spreading through the world.

If he remained, he would be burned to death. If he charged out while coughing, he would be captured. There was no proper means of resolving the situation.

If he was to survive and learn why the world had become the way it was, he had to use a method even more unreasonable than the unreasonable situation.

Part 2

Kamijou Touma did not have time to think up a means of escaping safely.

This crazy group had set fire to a house just because they heard a TV, but even they would not want to die in the house they set on fire.

Kamijou used that timing.

What he did was quite simple: he jumped down from the large hole created by the crumbled wall.

But he did so such that he landed on top of the men leaving the burning house.

This was no time to worry about his opponents. He focused solely on neutralizing this threat, so he did not hesitate to fall forcefully on top of the group of three or four men.

He heard the dull sound of something being crushed.

A scream erupted nearby.

The men did not fully absorb the impact, so Kamijou rolled into the junk-filled yard. The remains of the balcony and the blocks of the wall jabbed into his back. Nevertheless, he frantically got up and leaned over the concrete fence until he fell onto the other side.

A dry explosive sound burst out.

As he lay on the road, Kamijou realized what that noise meant and began to sweat.

(A gun!?)

But he was not concerned only because this was a deadly weapon with a long range.

In the country of Japan, there was a single primary profession that was allowed to carry such weapons.

“Does that mean they’re police officers!?”

His shout was answered by more gunfire. Disconcerting sounds of breaking and chipping came from the concrete wall between them. Kamijou simply ran. He took every turn he could, so he ran in a zigzag along the city streets that were arranged like a Go board. All of the buildings were destroyed and only the occasional one was still mostly standing. Black smoke rose everywhere and great pillars of fire rose in some areas where the underground gas pipes had been damaged, but there was no sign of firefighters arriving.

He had assumed those people had been the strange eccentrics only seen on TV that were given as representatives of "young people these days".

But they had been police officers.

That was the profession meant to protect law and order, but they had set fire to a stranger's house because they had heard a TV inside. Judging from that basis, Kamijou did not want to think what normal people would do.

He heard a roar overhead that resembled the sound of cloth flapping in the wind amplified dozens of times.

He came to a stop and looked up into the blazing sky. A helicopter was shining a powerful floodlight onto the ground. He did not know the details, but it was likely a military helicopter.

As it traveled in a straight line, it shined the light on a pile of rubble and seemed to find something. With a continuous explosive roar, it fired a line of tracer bullets that looked like fireworks.

Kamijou gasped for breath while leaning up against a telephone pole which was something he did not often see while living in Academy City.

His throat stung.

This was more than exhaustion from running. He felt something ominous hanging in the air.

"So you overcame the first trial," said a girl's voice.

The Magic God sat on the top of the telephone pole with her legs elegantly crossed.

Kamijou moved from the pole and shouted up at her.

"What in the world did you do!?"

"I did nothing," replied the blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl with a slight smile. "I merely changed everyone's *point of view*."

Othinus vanished in the blink of an eye. He looked around but found no sign of the girl.

Instead, he found a few people in the rubble.

They were not moving in the slightest.

"..."

There was no obvious sign of violence like with the helicopter or police, but it did not take a specialized coroner to tell what had happened to those bodies which were dried up like mummies.

They had starved to death.

A disturbing voice came from the emergency radio in one of their branch-like arms.

"The UN resolution has cut off all diplomacy, trade, and food assistance for the country. Japan is less than 40% self-sufficient in its food supply, so more than one in two people are expected to die."

"There is no real need to fight. After the war, Japan was set up such that it would dry up on its own without help. You could say we gave it a collar. But it seems that country will try to eat tree roots and human flesh if it needs to, so it is best to make absolutely sure."

Kamijou was fed up with it all.

He left that area and walked through the residential streets. Something quite heavy must have driven along them because they were horribly cracked.

After walking for a while, he finally gained a hint as to where he was.

At a ninety degree turn, he found a metal road sign. It was scorched black due to exposure to flames or high heat, but he could still make out the place name.

"...Shibuya?"

A chill ran down his back.

This pile of rubble was Shibuya?

"This is the place I've seen on TV so many times?"

One might think of Shibuya as a place filled with the sources of new fashions, industrial facilities, and high-class brand-name stores, but it actually had a peaceful residential district and bars only a few hundred meters from the station. (Of course, the prices of the houses were laughably high.)

It seemed Kamijou had made his way from the residential district and into the industrial district.

None of it felt real.

This was partly due to living within the walls of Academy City, but the sight before him was also very different from what he had seen on TV.

There were no buildings taller than fifteen meters.

The ones that had been there had crumbled into rubble. The elevated roadways were in pieces. The cityscape had been smashed by an overwhelming force and only the bases of buildings remained after taking fatal damage.

(Did Gremlin do this? Or was it the coalition?)

“It wasn’t me,” said a voice.

Inside a shop with shattered windows and all its brand-name items stolen, an eyepatch-wearing girl rotated in front of a large mirror.

“And it does not seem to be over yet.”

She vanished as if she were made of smoke.

The city had supposedly lost all power, but a cheerful voice came from the store’s speakers.

It seemed to be a Japanese translation of some foreign news.

“Great effort has been put into evacuating the students from Academy City, but the coalition refuses to allow it. They say they will nip all negative possibilities in the bud by bombing every place that accepts the evacuees. How scary. A peaceful world truly is best.”

Kamijou saw some lights.

They looked like shooting stars, but there were too many of them.

“It seems precision bombings of Saitama, Yokosuka, Shizuoka, and Kofu have begun. It’s over. They aren’t going to let them out of Kantou. We have a warning to all you good boys and girls! If you don’t want your home blown to smithereens, don’t let them into your city! Inviting in the evacuees will end badly, baby!”

Twenty to thirty flashes of light passed over Kamijou’s head. They stabbed into the central structures like the subway station.

The cheerful voice provided commentary.

The voice implicitly indicated how this was viewed by those on the “outside”.

“Hey, I’ve got some more hot information. This time, it’s Shibuya! Let’s begin the countdown until the villains are slain. Ten, nine, eight, seven... It’s time for a happy new age!! Hoo!!”

The attack landed.

A flash of light burst out.

A great roar followed.

And everything burned.

Kamijou did not even have time to get down.

Shortly after the flash of light, a wall of dust spread out to visually represent the shockwave. The cruise missiles had targeted the subway station over one hundred meters away, but his body was still thrown into the air. He did not know what he hit, but a dull pain exploded in the back of his head.

“Gh...wah!! Cough cough!!”

He had hit his head, yet a powerful urge to vomit rose up from his stomach.

However, he did not have time to leisurely check on his injuries.

“Kssssshhhh!!”

The store’s speaker seemed to have been damaged in the blast because it only produced static. But Kamijou remembered what that the voice had said.

The bombings were targeting the students who had fled Academy City.

In which case...

“It can’t be,” he muttered.

Familiar faces filled his aching head.

“This isn’t a joke, dammit!!”

He ignored his woozy head and ran toward the station. As he approached, he felt a stinging pain on his skin. He belatedly realized the air was extremely hot.

The building had completely lost its original form and it truly collapsed as he watched.

What if a large number of people had been hiding in there?

(No. No!! I've heard Shibuya Station is built like a giant vertical hole leading dozens of meters underground. If the people were trying to evacuate, they would head as far down as possible. Just because the building on the surface collapsed doesn't mean they were wiped out!!)

"Don't be so sure," said a girl's voice.

For some reason, she rode up alongside him on an electric two-wheeled vehicle that she had picked up somewhere.

"Things might not go as nicely as you think they will."

"!!"

He tried to punch her, but the Magic God and her vehicle disappeared like smoke.

By the time he reached the station building, the pain on his skin was the same as on a midsummer beach. Even with the thick soles of his shoes, the bottoms of his feet hurt worse than his exposed face. The ground may have been heated like a frying pan. He would not have done so regardless, but he was not about to sit down for a breather.

(Where's the entrance?)

He looked around.

The building itself had been reduced to a pile of rubble, so it was difficult to decide what part had been where. Concrete blocks were piled up with no gap between them. There simply was not any space for someone to enter.

(Shit. How am I supposed to get in!? The people inside will suffocate like this!!)

Suddenly, he heard some heavy rocks crumbling.

And then he saw it.

But it was not the entrance he saw.

"Fuki...yo...se...?"

His voice was trembling.

He finally saw a familiar face. He wanted to rescue this classmate as soon as possible, but he also desperately wished she was not here.

"Fukiyoseeee

She was a girl whose primary features were her large breasts and her long black hair which was parted to expose her forehead.

She was collapsed at the foot of a pile of rubble. She lay atop the ground which stabbed through Kamijou's shoes as if it was a rock heated in the flames of hell.

He ran over and frantically picked her up.

Her black hair covered her face, so he could not see how much damage had been done.

However, she was still breathing shallowly.

Something could be done.

"Dammit!! Are you okay!? I'll do something about this. I *will* save you!!"

It felt like he was lifting up a thick and heavy clump of rubber.

An amateur like him could not tell what had happened inside her body, but he knew he had to treat her burns. Finding ice in a powerless city would be difficult, but he thought he could find water.

"...Ah..."

Her cracked lips moved ever so slightly.

He stopped her with a hand.

"Don't try to speak. You need medical treatment first, so let's get you away from here."

The announcement had said the bombings were targeting the students who had evacuated Academy City. If classes, school years, or entire schools were traveling in groups, others he knew might also be in Shibuya. There was so much he wanted to ask her, but her safety came first.

With that in mind, he stood up while still holding her.

He looked around.

(Is there anywhere where I can safely lay her down? Then I need water and a towel. I might not be able to find ice, but there might be some cold spray left in a can. It shouldn't be hard to find a sporting goods store in Shibuya.)

As he thought, his classmate stirred weakly in his arms.

He paid it no heed.

But that turned out to be a mistake.

He heard a small noise.

It was the noise of her stabbing his side with a shard of glass she held in her hand.

“Eh? Ah...?”

For an instant, he did not understand what had happened.

He was so confused that he did not even feel the pain.

It only started feeling real the second time.

Fukiyose Seiri was undoubtedly supposed to be on his side, but she moved her trembling hand *and twisted her wrist while holding the glass shard.*

“Eh? Gbh!? Gah! Gbheh...!!”

Intense pain travelled along his spine and assaulted his entire upper body.

Strength left his extremities.

(Not good.)

He could no longer support Fukiyose, so she fell to the scorching tile of the sidewalk.

He could not suppress the urge to vomit.

The most he could manage was turning his head to the side.

“Cough cough!! Gbgh!! Gbhah!?”

What spewed from his mouth was not vomit. It was a red liquid. He finally realized just how serious the situation was when he imagined how that blood had travelled through his body to overflow from his mouth.

“Ah...”

He stumbled backwards.

He reached down for the glass shard which had been dyed red. Feeling the hard object in his side made him shudder, but he managed to pull it out. And he coughed up more blood. He could no longer even guess how much of his life this action had taken away.

He heard the sound of dragging cloth.

Fukiyose was slowly trying to stand up from where she had fallen to the ground.

“How can...”

She spoke.

He had never seen this expression on her face before.

He even forgot to hold his wound as he stared at her.

“How can you talk about saving me?”

Resentment.

That word gave his classmate’s words the fierceness they needed to wear at his very soul.

“*Kamijou Touma. If you had not done what you did, no one would have had to die!!*”

Her words felt like a physical blow.

With the sound of scraping metal, his classmate pulled a scorched piece of rebar from the rubble.

But Kamijou Touma did not understand.

What had he done?

What had happened during the confrontation with Othinus at Sargasso?

Even as she raised the blunt weapon before his eyes, he could not move.

That boy had fought many magicians and espers. He had even brought an end to World War III, but he was going to be easily killed by a mere classmate.

But just before it happened, an LCD TV buried in the rubble came to life for some reason.

“A second and third wave of cruise missiles will soon be fired from the sea. Look at this footage. Those lines of light are thought to be the missiles. They will hit...now!!”

A deluge of light and sound swallowed up everything.

Fortunately (if that word even applied in this situation), the missiles which numbered in the double digits seemed to land on the other side of the pile of rubble which had been the subway station. The black silhouette of that giant hill was the only thing visible as the color white filled the world.

But that did not mean they were safe.

A whirl of tremendous heat swept over them. The leaves of the broken and fallen roadside trees changed color as they were audibly scorched. Kamijou frantically shut his eyes and held his breath, but he felt his shut lips stick together to an odd extent.

And more importantly, the solid ground below him suddenly crumbled downwards.

That was when he recalled that Shibuya Station had a large open area that extended deep underground.

Part 3

He fell.

He seemed to fall forever.

Even if a structure several meters deep had completely collapsed and become a single giant hole, he would not fall for this long.

Or perhaps the explosion had knocked him unconscious and this was a dream.

Amid his vague sense of reality and the passage of time, Kamijou heard a girl speak.

“Do you understand now?”

It was Magic God Othinus.

The blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl spoke to him while falling upside down alongside him.

“This is a world with a different point of view.”

“What? What point of view did you change to make this world!?”

“Do you still not get it?” She laughed mockingly. “*Their point of view concerning you*.”

Kamijou Touma awoke to a dull impact.

The lack of electricity meant he was surrounded in almost complete darkness, but he seemed to be in the underground portion of the subway station. He had not fallen all that far. He could see the broken portion of the ceiling he had fallen through and the destroyed cityscape was visible beyond it. That allowed a bit of light in.

Fukiyose Seiri was not with him.

It seemed she had not been caught in the collapse.

“Gwahhh!!!???”

When he tried to move, intense pain rushed from his side and into his entire body. He had been stabbed in the side by Fukiyose. Not only that, but she had twisted the blade to widen the wound and further damage his insides. It had been the action of someone intending to kill. He brought a hand to the wound and discovered the pool of red blood on the floor was larger than he had thought.

He doubted an amateur wrapping bandages around it would help at this point.

But hoping for something he would not receive would not help his situation. He doubted anyone would call an ambulance for him and he doubted an ambulance would come if someone did. He could not rely on the off chance of a doctor happening to pass by.

“...Ow...”

He had no idea how much strength he had left, but he gathered what he had and tried to stand.

He removed his coat, balled it up, and pressed it against his wound.

The LCD monitor meant to display railroad information turned on.

“~Topic: Confirmation of Academy City’s Destruction~ Academy City, the city which produced Kamijou Touma, has had all supply lines cut off with multiple nuclear landmines placed around their territory. The city is known for its unusually high level of self-sufficiency due to its multistory vegetable factories and other technologies, but it cannot sustain itself with no supplies whatsoever. –This has been WNP news.”

“Not again.”

Kamijou’s wavering vision desperately raced across the text.

There was still a lot he did not understand, but he had at least come to understand that most of the people in the world hated him and that any people or organizations that were even remotely connected to him were being indiscriminately attacked.

The one thing he did not know was why.

And he belatedly realized this was not the time to worry about why.

“That’s right.”

What if Kamijou Touma were being treated as an absolute evil?

What if every last person with even a slight connection to him was being attacked?

“Where are my parents!?”

The monitor died again.

But darkness did not return. In place of the monitor’s light, a bright light appeared in front of him. It seemed to be a powerful flashlight.

Someone was approaching.

Whoever it was, he could not let his guard down. The deep wound in his side proved that.

“Kami-yan...”

He heard the familiar voice of a classmate.

This made him grimace.

When the violent policemen had set fire to that house, he had felt horribly uneasy due to being alone. At the time, he would never have thought it possible to feel such fear over meeting a friend.

He spoke this friend’s name.

“Aogami Pierce.”

“I never thought I’d run across you here. I’m impressed. I really am. I’m not sure how you managed to avoid being surrounded on your way here. Right now, everyone would applaud and cheer if you were crucified in the public square.”

The stabbing malice in the boy’s voice caused Kamijou to slowly shake his head.

He could not hold a proper conversation with him.

“Just to be clear, they haven’t been brainwashed,” said a girl’s voice. Othinus was leaning her back up against his back. “I haven’t added anything new. As I said, I merely changed their point of view. You had already done what it would take to be treated like this. It was just that no one – yourself included – had realized it before.”

He quickly turned around, but there was no one there.

Magic God Othinus was still behind him.

“You always charged headfirst into some kind of incident, used your fists to defeat your enemy, and protected someone and their small world as a result. By accumulating enough such incidents, you even managed to bring World War III to an end. You were treated as a type of hero and only that positive aspect was emphasized. That is what happened in the world you know.”

She whispered the words.

Rather than beating him down with her words, she let them slip deep inside of him.

“*But what if their point of view is changed?* You bare your fangs toward anyone you don’t like, jump in and steal every girl you so much as set your eyes on, and relentlessly swing your fist toward anyone who resists. That is another side of the person known as Kamijou Touma. You chose your fists as your means of solving problems. It may seem cute compared to a sword or gun, but you managed to influence the outcome of World War III with that method. It is strange for people to silently accept an incarnation of violence like that. The hatred people have toward national dictators is not enough for you.”

The scent and warmth of the girl leaning up against his back cleanly vanished.

His (supposed) classmate, Aogami Pierce, spoke as if he had not seen any of that.

“Kami-yan, I know you have your own issues, but why did you have to do it around us?”

He sounded disgusted.

The light of his flashlight spun around as he altered his grip on it. It was now a baton-like weapon that used the weight of the hard and thick casing and the batteries inside.

“If you were gonna do that, do it on the other side of the planet!! No, do it on the other side of the moon or the other side of Mars!! I don’t understand why we had to go through this. *If you had only stayed put and did nothing, none of this would’ve happened!!*”

Those words settled it.

Kamijou had not been naïve enough to think his words would get through to his classmate, but now he shook his head.

And he did so with clear intent.

“I can’t do that, Aogami Pierce.”

He had been indirectly struck by the blast of cruise missiles, a girl from his class had stabbed him in the side, and his body was otherwise battered, but he gained the energy for a counterattack.

That energy increased each time he spoke.

“All of this may have happened because of me and all of you may have nowhere left simply because you knew me.”

Deep down, he wished he did not have this strength at a time like this.

But even so, he continued speaking.

“*But I will never agree that staying silent and overlooking what happened was the right thing to do.*”

“I never...”

A creaking sound filled the darkness.

By the time Kamijou realized that, the metal flashlight had already been swung up into the air.

“I never intended to debate the issue!!”

“...!?”

Kamijou’s body was battered both inside and out, so he could not expect to move quickly enough to dodge the attack.

His only focus was on preserving his right hand.

The instant he held up his left arm to protect his head, the flashlight dropped mercilessly toward him. With an unpleasant smashing noise, incredible pain exploded not in the skin but in the core of his arm. The pain felt like a dentist’s drill amplified many times.

His bone had either cracked or broken.

He tried not to think about the fact that the blow had been with his classmate’s full strength. He used his remaining right hand to grab Aogami Pierce’s collar. He pulled him forward before the second blow arrived.

At the same time, he pulled his own head back and swung it down like a hammer.

His hard forehead smashed into the bridge of his classmate’s nose and directly rattled his brain.

“Gh...bah!?”

“I’m sorry, Aogami Pierce.”

His left arm hung uselessly at his side. He ignored the swelling pain rising within it and spoke.

“There is something I have to see with my own eyes. I want to know what happened to my parents, so I can’t be taken out here!!”

“…”

“I promise I will do something about this. If all of this really did happen because of me, I swear I will do something about it. So get out of my way. I beg you...cough...move out of the way.”

He heard a clattering noise as Aogami Pierce dropped the flashlight he had used as a blunt weapon.

As it rolled along the floor, it cast its circle of light all over the place. Kamijou and Aogami Pierce’s expressions were hidden by the darkness.

And then Kamijou Touma heard his classmate whisper some words.

“*Do you really still have hope?*”

The two clashed.

To make sure he finished off Kamijou who could not use one arm, Aogami Pierce tried to tackle him at the ground and climb on top of him. If Kamijou could not use his legs, it was over.

But Kamijou understood his own weakness.

He took a softball-sized fragment of concrete from the ground and kicked it up to waist height.

It rose to the exact same height as Aogami Pierce’s face as he performed his tackle.

Fortunately, the area was dark.

Once he heard a dull noise, Kamijou grabbed Aogami Pierce’s hair, tripped his feet, and used his one working arm to throw him down onto his back. He heard the boy coughing and swung up his foot to aim a strike toward the solar plexus. If he put his weight into the blow, he would be able to knock him unconscious.

“…”

But then he stopped.

He stepped back from Aogami Pierce, turned around, and ran off.

He was surrounded by darkness.

He did not know where to find an exit.

“If you want to feel despair that badly, have at it.”

Aogami Pierce’s words stabbed into him from behind.

“There’s nowhere left for you in this world! We lost everything, so I won’t let the source of it all be the only one saved!!”

This was the worst feeling Kamijou had ever experienced.

The farther he went, the farther he seemed to fall.

“...Ah. Gh.”

The stab wound in his side was quite bad. His left arm hang limply down beside him. Pain seemed to stab into his entire body and it was mixed with a chill coming from his spine.

He felt as if a large hole had been opened in the vessel holding his life. He could feel the strength he needed to move draining away. He could not even guess how much longer he would be able to stand.

(Still...)

He placed a hand on the wall and tried to support his limp body as he gasped for breath. The flavor of iron filled his mouth.

(I need to see if my parents are okay. If I don’t...)

“How brave of you,” said a voice.

A blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl hung upside-down from the ceiling like a bat.

“But if you want to see it for yourself, I won’t stop you.”

“...?”

“Also.” Othinus smiled thinly while upside-down. “You should be more cautious of your surroundings.”

The question in his mind caused him to react an instant too slow.

He felt a sharp blade stab into his soft flesh.

This time, he realized that it was really and truly over.

The attack had come from behind.

He reached around with his usable right hand and found a much bigger and thicker handle than he had expected. If the handle was this large, it had to be a true kitchen knife that was larger than a fruit knife.

His determination and will crumbled away. After feeling himself tilt to the side, he leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor.

He gathered all the strength he had left and slowly looked up at the attacker.

He wanted to see who it was that had blood covering their hands.

“Komoe...sensei...?”

“Kamijou-chan...”

His homeroom teacher was only 135 centimeters tall and looked like a child. She had not been the type of person to do this. This had to be the same as the police officers. If she was doing something like this, the very era and world had to have been on the road to destruction.

“I’m sorry, Kamijou-chan...”

Burning pain exploded in his back.

It seemed her small hands had pulled out the knife. Naturally, she was not doing so in order to treat his wound. The next strike was coming. He knew it was coming, but he had no strength left. As he sat while leaning against the wall, he finally completely collapsed to the floor.

“But I saw...all sorts of horrible things happening to the class. None of that...none of that should ever have happened. I have to take responsibility.”

“...”

He could no longer move his mouth.

He moved only his eyes as he tried to take in as much information as he could.

And then he saw bright light fill the dark underground area.

The light came from LCD monitors and TVs installed throughout the station.

“It is true that Touma is our son. There is no denying that.”

That familiar voice brought his sinking consciousness back to the surface.

The light reflecting off the bloody knife seemed to be showing the inside of a building. It resembled the courthouses he had seen in dramas, but Kamijou was unsure if it was a real courtroom. It may have been one from overseas.

And two people he could no longer reach were in the center of the screen.

They were being charged with the crime of giving birth to Kamijou Touma. And here he was collapsed and unable to save them. Both of those facts brought him shame and he apologized again and again in his heart.

This must have been what Aogami Pierce had meant.

And this was the future Othinus had spoken of with such delight.

Komoe-sensei slowly approached him while soaked in his blood. She held the deadly knife in her hand and had her back to the rectangular box of the LCD monitor installed near the ceiling. Tears poured from her eyes, but the resolution in her gait told Kamijou there was no hope of talking her out of it.

(I'm sorry.)

He did not know what exactly had happened.

He did not know what specific effects the change to people's "point of view" had caused.

Even so, he caught a glimpse of what had happened. And that was enough to floor him.

(I'm so sorry.)

The footage of his parents seemed to create a halo behind the murderer's head.

He continued apologizing in the direction of both them.

And then he heard more from his father.

"But we have realized something!! To destroy the absolute evil that is Kamijou Touma, the help of those who know him best is needed. You can judge us if you want, but please do so after it is all over! Please give us a chance to right the mistake we have made!!"

The world filled with cheers, applause, and comments of praise.

It reminded Kamijou of a giant gear beginning to move toward a bright future.

(Ahh... True despair never stays within your expectations, does it?)

He could no longer move anything but his eyes, but he saw Tsukuyomi Komoe slowly raise the large knife.

He had no way to defend himself.

“In the end, who actually saw you for who you are?” whispered Othinus happily.

She was staring down at him while crouching down next to where he lay. She looked like a child watching a strange bug crawl around.

“I used the lance to regulate my power as a Magic God and created this world with a different point of view. On one side you are a hero and on the other you are an incarnation of destruction. But what does that matter? If people had seen you for who you really were, at least one person might have come to save you.”

It seemed like time had stopped.

Or perhaps only this place where Othinus was had changed.

It may have been like a waking dream or when one’s life flashed before their eyes.

“No matter how many people surrounded you, none of them were actually looking at you. After seeing your name, your outer shell, and a list of your actions, they decided for themselves what kind of person you must be. That is why their impression of you was so easily manipulated by changing their point of view.”

Othinus continued to speak while ignoring Komoe-sensei raising the knife.

“Now, is all this really necessary?”

She knew the answer, but she asked again just to check.

“Is this really worth risking your life to protect? All of you are nothing more than different individuals.”

“...”

While collapsed on the ground, Kamijou Touma moved his eyes slightly in response.

For some reason, he regained the slight strength needed to form words.

“...It is.”

“?”

“Despite all that, it is certainly worth protecting.”

No matter how much tragedy a person was thrashed by, they deserved a chance to stand back up. Some people had twisted their relationships, surrounded themselves with hatred,

and gave no thought to living a happy life, but even they had the option of reversing each of those decisions.

That was how Kamijou Touma had overcome a few different incidents in the past.

He had seen people who returned to the light.

It was now Kamijou's turn to struggle.

He may have been the source of this world, but he was prepared to accept it all, make up for all of it, and continue forward.

Everything would return to normal.

He would make sure of it.

"I see."

Othinus smiled a bit.

It was a dark, dark, dark smile.

"It seems you are no different from the foolish frog that does not notice the heat of the water he is being boiled in. I had thought the immutability of your right hand was my greatest enemy, but it seems another obstacle has presented itself. But it is so pathetic that it would be foolish to face it seriously. In that case, I will make a slight change of plans and enjoy this."

"What are you going to do?"

He received no response.

The girl known as a Magic God gave an exaggerated snap of her fingers.

In the next moment, time sped back up to normal and Tsukuyomi Komoe swung the knife forcefully down.

CHAPTER 6

Shifting and Fluctuating World.

Version_Beta.

Part 1

"...Ah!?"

"Kamijou" awoke.

He was in Academy City. Specifically, he was in the usual classroom of his school.

His classmates were away from their desks and freely enjoying themselves. Their teacher was not present. The smell of lunches reached his nose.

It seemed he had fallen asleep while lying on his desk at lunchtime.

"Kamijou" slowly tilted his head.

"What was that just now?"

His palms were covered in sweat, but he found no stab wound when he reached for the side of his uniform. His left arm was not broken either.

It made sense.

That horrible hell of flames, smoke, rubble, and blood would never happen in real life.

But even so, "Kamijou" found it hard to breathe for a while.

Once he patted himself down and found he was not even scratched, he finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"What are you doing, 'Kamijou Touma'?"

He heard an exasperated voice from a nearby desk.

It was Fukiyose Seiri.

Her long black hair, forehead, and bountiful breasts were her primary features.

“Fukiyose!?”

“What?”

“Are your burns okay!? You don’t seem to be bleeding. Are you sure you don’t need a doctor!?”

“W-w-wait! Why are you groping me all over the- Where the hell do you think you’re touching me!!”

After a wonderfully healthy sound of impact, “Kamijou” rolled across the classroom, knocking away several chairs and desks in the process.

“I do not know what kind of dream you were having, but how about you wake up!?”

“Eh? Ah? ...A dream?”

“Kamijou” stared blankly at her.

That was when Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado Motoharu leaned in to join the conversation.

“Meh heh heh. We all have those dreams, but only Kami-yan would go right ahead and start groping her.”

“Yeah, what was with that? Grabbing at Fukiyose’s melons while half asleep is quite the technique, Kami-yan! I certainly don’t have the courage to do it with such a straight face!! So this is how a true master does it!!”

“Okay, you two. Thank you for volunteering to participate in a scientific experiment to see if heaven exists.”

With that deadpan comment, “Kamijou” climbed up onto his desk and jumped down to attack his horrible friends.

Aogami Pierce and Tsuchimikado Motoharu caught the attack and then lifted him extremely unsteadily up into the air. At the same moment, the classroom door slid open.

“Kamijou” assumed their homeroom teacher Tsukuyomi Komoe had rushed in upon hearing the commotion.

However...

“ ‘Touma’! I’m not satisfied with the lunch you left for me! I’ve suggested it countless times, but now I have to make an official request to introduce a second lunch!!”

“You ‘have to’!? And how is that a reason for someone as suspicious-looking as you to barge into our school!? ...Wah! Stop it, you idiots! Don’t silently toss me up into the air like that! I’m going to hit the ceiling! And how can you two lift me up so easi-...egch!?”

“Okay, it’s time for our first afternoon lesson.”

Meanwhile, Komoe-sensei arrived despite the chime not having rung yet.

“Today, we will be referencing the records and testimony related to Mifune Chizuko, an esper who existed before the establishment of the quantum theory system. We will-... Eeeee!? Wh-wh-why is ‘Kamijou’-chan hanging down with his head stuck in the classroom ceiling!?”

“...”

“Who would’ve thought there was a duct opening there?” commented Aogami Pierce. “Hm? Wait a sec. I-is this the beginning of a long, long afterschool labyrinth leading to the captivating girl’s locker room?”

“I’m more interested in how Komoe-sensei immediately knew it was Kami-yan despite everyone wearing the same uniform from the neck down, nyah.”

Once “Kamijou” realized no one was going to save him, he took action himself.

He pressed his palms against the ceiling and pushed to force his body downwards.

“Fwooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

He let out what sounded like the cry of a pervert who had awoken to a strange new path and his head popped out of the ceiling. Freed from his restraints, “Kamijou” fell upside-down, struck his back on his own desk, and ended up writing in pain on the floor.

A group of girls in one corner of the class began shouting.

“Quiet down, ‘Kamijou’! Your loud voice is scaring the kitty.”

“Uryah! You can have the salmon flakes left in the corner of my bento box☆”

Index refused to stay silent when she saw this.

“Sphinx has already gained his next meal without me!? ‘Touma’, th-that is exactly what I mean by a second lunch!!”

“D-do you not know how to feel worried about your landlord or feel happy for the satisfaction of your cat?”

“Kamijou” was literally having trouble breathing, but the white nun did not seem to care.

She showed no sign of leaving until she was given a new world of bread and rice, but the cafeteria and school store would be sold out with the lunch break almost at its end. This would primarily be a problem for Komoe-sensei. His classmates would love skipping their first afternoon class, but “Kamijou” had no intention of being the bad Santa who provided that kind of outlaw’s dream.

And so he made a suggestion.

“Index-san.”

“What is it, ‘Touma’-san!?”

“You can have a scraped-together meal here or you can be patient and have a luxurious dinner tonight. Which will you choose?”

Part 2

Almost every event linked directly to food with the girl named Index, so her concept of love did not seem very developed. And her idea of a school likely had all the windows broken, all the partitions and stall walls broken in the bathrooms, and modified motorcycles running through the halls. Her worldview was in a post-apocalyptic state.

“Oden! I’ve heard that Japan’s oden is one of the world’s leading healthy hot pot dishes. You can eat as much as you want without getting sick!!”

“I-Is this a miracle I’m witnessing? That gluttonous monster actually has the sense to worry about her health and cholesterol!?”

“...‘Touma’?”

“Fine. Today we can have a merciless oden fever! My finances may be just barely scraping by, but this is no time to worry about that! If this isn’t a time to celebrate, what the hell is!?”

“ ‘Touma’! Wait, ‘Touma’! I didn’t like the sound of some of that, so don’t continue on before I can get angry! Let’s take care of it all one by one!”

“For a week starting tomorrow, every meal will be nothing but bread crust and a clear soup of broth watered down five times, but that’s okay, right!? It’s all for the sake of today’s oden fever, so we have no choice!!”

“ ‘Touma’, you just said something really important! I’m disturbingly on board with this idea, but let’s calm down and think it through!!”

Index was actually applying the brakes for once, but “Kamijou” refused to give in once he had decided on something.

As he dragged the white nun along, he did not head for the usual ultra-cheap supermarket. Index’s fear grew as she saw them approach the department store district in front of the train station. At this rate, she might really have to live off of bread crust while reminiscing on the oden from tonight.

The calico cat on her head gave a carefree mew. His food was already divided up by day in a paper carton back in the apartment.

Part 3

Two sisters walked along the path home from school.

They were Kumokawa Seria and Kumokawa Maria.

One was the brains behind one of Academy City’s board members and she controlled people’s hearts purely with her words rather than with an esper power. The other had an ability named Violence Donut that allowed her to manipulate centrifugal force and she was training at Ryouran Maid School to be a top-rate maid. (Her power had nothing to do with being a maid.)

They were both nice to look at, but the younger sister snapped at the older sister as they walked alongside each other.

“You changed where you’re living again, didn’t you!? I won’t ask about the details, but at least contact me if you’re going to move!”

“Yawn... I do have my reasons, you know? Also, does it really matter if I don’t tell my family about it right away? It’s not like I have a serious chronic disease and we’ll still live in the same city no matter where I move.”

“It would be fine if the few days it takes me to find your new place wasn’t enough for the area around the kitchen sink to reach such a disastrous state that it almost destroys my ideas of femininity. Living in an apartment instead of a student dorm is great, but you have to be more careful when leasing.”

“Don’t the dishes from that delivery service turn to oil if you leave them out? Decomposition is a part of the food chain.”

“That’s how you attract flies and roaches! Do I need to explain this to you from the parts that give me goose bumps just to think about!?”

Based on independent research conducted by Ryouran Maid School, its students’ families tended to have people who were terrible with all housework, so all the work was usually left to the maids-in-training. However, it seemed pampering them too much could be a problem.

“On the other hand, I’m relieved.”

“About what?”

“That your obsession with working only applies to your sister. I was worried you would go live in some guy’s house.”

“Bfff!?”

“Specifically, I thought you would end up living with my school’s spiky-haired boy.”

“It wasn’t me you were worried about at all!! And he may have saved me in Baggage City, but my feelings never went beyond normal gratitude. I don’t plan to steal your favorite boy, so you don’t have to spy on me like that.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I am still perfectly calm.”

“Then why do I see tears in your eyes and why are your legs trembling?”

She was an expert at manipulating people’s hearts, but it seemed her own heart was the exception. And the “heroic tales” of Academy City’s #5, which Maria had heard via her classmate Tsuchimikado Maika, suggested that Level 5 was the same.

Just as Maria let out a sigh, she heard a boy and girl shouting behind her.

“ ‘Touma’! I want to ask you something before we get to the oden! Why were you so surprised to hear I’m worried about my weight and my health!?”

“That doesn’t matter!! What matters is that we go with this miraculous flow and buy the ingredients for some oden! After all, there’s always the risk of you waking up from this delusion and demanding a fried chicken festival instead!!!!!!”

“How can you say it doesn’t matter!? I-I won’t let you go any further!!”

“Stop that, you idiot. Don’t grab my hand and slam on the brakes like a spoiled child. ...Wah!? Don’t just let go all of a sudden either!!”

Hearing a strange comical sound effect, the Kumokawa sisters both frowned.

“Hm?” they said in unison.

“Kamijou Touma” had suddenly shot forward and landed face up with his head between the legs of Kumokawa Maria’s bee-like maid outfit.

“.....”

Time seemed to freeze.

The theory of relativity seemed to break down around “Kamijou Touma” as he entered the tunnel created by the girl’s legs and waist. Somewhere, Einstein had to be crying. In a way, this was a perfectly normal occurrence. It was so normal that Kumokawa Seria began to tremble.

“So you do have a connection!! That gratitude of yours was just the first step toward ensnaring him!!”

“What!? You’re mad at me instead of the one who did it!? Are you sure you aren’t turning into Hera from Greek mythology!?”

“Then let me ask you this: how do you feel about giving him a panoramic view of your underwear? I would think a normal person would reflexively jump back and try to end the situation as quickly as possible.”

“Because of my Violence Donut, I purposefully wear panties I’m fine with people seeing, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“See!? If you have to choose yes or no, you’re leaning towards yes!!”

“By the way, is anyone going to do anything about this boy? He must have a lot of freedom.”

“I think she’s going to handle it.”

Kumokawa Seria used her thumb to point at a nun in a white habit who was approaching with a bewitching glitter in her eye.

Kumokawa Maria began to contemplate the unfairness of her sister glaring at her but showing no concern about the other girl.

“ ‘Touma’!! Get out of there right this instant! You look like someone hiding under a table during an earthquake!!”

“O-only because you grabbed my hand and suddenly let go.”

“ ‘Touma’!!!!!!”

Hearing that high-pitched shout, “Kamijou Touma” frantically sat up as if his alarm clock had just gone off.

But that was a mistake.

He forgot to check above him.

The top of his head mercilessly struck the ceiling of the tunnel formed by Maria’s legs.

“G...”

Even if she commonly imitated capoeira while wearing a miniskirt maid outfit, this was far enough out of the ordinary that her entire face and even her ears turned red.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

“Wait! No! Stop! Bgh!?”

While confused as to what had happened, “Kamijou” felt a fist strike the back of his head through the skirt. He seriously thought it was going to leave a dent in his skull. As Kumokawa Seria watched on, a distant look entered her eyes.

“Ahh, I don’t know why I’m so surprised. This may be a horrible situation, but I knew this would happen if I didn’t do anything!!”

Meanwhile, Index gnashed her canine teeth and gave off enough of a predatory aura to remind the calico cat she held of its animal instincts.

“ ‘Touma’. I’m not going to explain anything more, but you understand what’s going to happen, right?”

The tiny people within “Kamijou Touma” (who were in charge of defense) spread their arms to block the way and warned him of the coming danger.

His instincts were boiling over as they told him to do whatever it took to avoid having the back of his head bitten open. And he found an extreme solution with incredible speed.

“Wah!! Wait! What are you doing!?”

“It’s called a piggyback ride!!” shouted “Kamijou” in desperation.

He changed his position within Kumokawa Maria’s miniskirt, stuck his head between her legs, gathered strength in his own legs, and groaned as he straightened his back.

Index was on standby to bite at the back of his head, but she gained a look of surprise when she finally realized how serious the situation was.

“Wh-what!? I want to bite at the back of your head, but I can’t attack because a girl’s butt and thighs are in the way!!”

“Mwa ha ha ha!! How much damage do you think my scalp has taken, Index!? ...Actually, I’d like to know that myself. Anyway!! I have already analyzed your attack pattern!! Now, how about we bring this entire series of events to an end, little girl!?”

“Wah! This is scary! Stop it! I feel like I’m about to fall!!”

Kumokawa Maria cried out as she was more or less taken hostage to act as the human helmet to protect “Kamijou Touma’s” head. She was only at shoulder height, but the way she wobbled back and forth above the hard road was bad for her heart.

She instinctually gathered strength in her thighs to keep her balance, but the instant her soft flesh squeezed, an aura of malice flowed out from her older sister.

Meanwhile, “Kamijou” did not have time to worry about that.

A jinx had captured his heart. If he ended up bitten after taking such drastic measures, he feared nothing would ever work.

“...”

“Calm down, Index-san! Put away those fangs and give this a peaceful resolution. If you don’t, I’ll have to go buy the ingredients for oden like this! You don’t want that, do you!?”

“I don’t want that either!! Are you going to carry me around on your shoulders as you shop!?”

“...”

“You’re right, ‘Touma’. If you’re willing to cause such a commotion, I guess I have to make a compromise. Specifically, I’ll master some techniques using my arms and legs!!”

“Please no! If you head down the course of a martial arts master, I won’t be any match for you!! Was I right and Index really is the final boss!?”

“...”

“W-wait. Don’t tell me you really do plan to walk through the city like this. St-stop. Don’t move your head like that. It’s rubbing against me.”

“By the way, why is that person on top of you grinning a little bit!?”

That was when something snapped within Kumokawa Seria.

Specifically, it was the “bag of patience” spoken of in the old days of Japan.

She cast aside her usual cool and intellectual aura of an upperclassman.

“Darassshhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

She leaped into the air while wearing her sailor uniform, gathered her feet, and performed a merciless dropkick on the center of “Kamijou Touma’s” back.

“Bgweeeeehhh!!”

With a cry like a crushed frog, the boy flew forward. Left in the air above him, Maria fell down and was caught by Seria who had landed face up on the ground.

Meanwhile, “Kamijou Touma” could tell he was rolling along the ground, but his vision suddenly blacked out.

He panicked as he wondered what had happened, but he quickly caught on. He had once more ended up deep within someone’s skirt.

And the only person in front of him had been the white nun.

As he trembled in fear, the voice of the judge arrived from the heavens above.

“I hope you’re ready for some pain, ‘Touma’.”

Part 4

She was true to her word.

After the “Kumokawa Maria is a Human Helmet!!” plan failed spectacularly, “Kamijou” fell prey to Index. The bee-colored maid-in-training then used her Violence Donut to damage all of his joints. Lastly, Kumokawa Seria inexplicably began stomping on him here and there with the heel of her loafer.

But “Kamijou Touma” refused to give up.

He had already decided they were eating oden that night.

Not to mention that Index’s anger showed no sign of dying down and the oden was necessary to extinguish those flames.

After parting ways with the angry Kumokawa sisters, “Kamijou” and Index entered the underground zone filled with high-class department stores they normally never allowed themselves inside.

It was once he saw the price tags that “Kamijou Touma” came back to his senses.

“Um...Index? I don’t think this is going to work.”

“But we came this far!”

“I’m not rejecting the idea of oden altogether. We’ll still have oden tonight. ...Buuuut how about we go with an economical oden pack at the supermarket? Or we can get two or three different kinds at the convenience store and have a more extravagant version of our usual stir-fried vegetables, grilled fish, rice, and miso soup dinner.”

“I already saw the best one!! If we turn back now, this desire will never disappear. If we lower the grade now, my oden craving will remain within me no matter how much I eat! That won’t save anyone!!”

“Can you please explain why you assume that will be a bad thing for not just you but me as-... Never mind.”

When he saw Index snap her teeth together like some kind of trap, “Kamijou” realized he could not back out now. He began thinking silently with a distant look in his eyes.

(Hello, bread crust. I will be seeing you a lot for a while.)

“Huh? What are you doing here?”

His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

He guessed that a true rich girl had a habit of always heading to the places with “high-class” in the name. But he soon realized something was off about her behavior.

And then it hit him.

She was in the grocery section of a high-class department store, but she did not have a cart or basket.

“Wh-what? Don’t tell me you’ve gone beyond vending machines and started full-blown shoplifting!”

“I really will blast you into the sky. How far would you like to go? The moon? Mars?”

When the girl known as the Railgun made a threat like that, it was no laughing matter. It would not have surprised him if she could gather various objects to construct a peaceful human mass driver in the middle of Academy City.

“I’m not here to shop.”

“So you are here to shopli-...”

“You don’t get a third chance.”

The genuine rich girl raised her middle finger as she gently warned him.

Irritation filled her tone.

“It seems my school’s dorm has been getting tons of junk mail telling people to come by and try samples of their new foods. The mail has been so full that some of the girls are too afraid to check it. They seem to be taking the name Tokiwadai too lightly, so I’m here to have a word or two with whoever’s responsible.”

“...”

It seemed having the approval of a rich girls’ school was enough to greatly increase the sales of a high-class department store. It was a bigger deal than having a popular entertainer in their commercials. Those girls simply lived in a different world from “Kamijou”.

“If I don’t do something, I get the feeling they’ll start standing in front of the dorm with a cooler in hand. I want to put an end to it before that happens. ...Anyway, I hear Floor 12 and above is their headquarters. This kind of dispute would normally be Kuroko’s territory, but she seemed busy.”

“Hm?” Index tilted her head next to “Kamijou”. “Short Hair, does this bad guy have food?”

“I suppose. If I grab him by the collar and shake him, I bet a pile of sweets will fall out.”

“That settles it!! ‘Touma’, I will head deeper into the dungeon for the sake of the world!!”

“Wait, Index! You can’t put shortcakes or Mont Blanc in oden!!”

In order to avoid having a truly chaotic hot pot that night, “Kamijou” did his best to stop Index. Mikoto seemed to want to talk more, but she sighed after checking the time on her cell phone. She cracked her neck and started toward the industrial elevator.

The topic then returned to dinner.

“If it’s going to be hell afterward regardless, why don’t we go all out and have high-class sukiyaki instead of oden!? I think we’ll have fewer regrets then!!”

“But that won’t get rid of the oden craving filling my chest! And now you’ve given me a sukiyaki craving!!”

“Don’t be stupid! There’s no way both is happening!! We only get to choose one and then our hellish bread crust life begins!”

“We could divide the pot in two...like this...and fill half with oden and half with sukiyaki.”

“The number of pots isn’t the issue! The ingredients are super expensive!! Do you understand?”

His terribly pronounced attempt at English at the end seemed to enrage the legitimate British girl. A carnivorous beast attacked the back of his head.

“Hnyaaaah!”

His scream shook the entire multistory department building.

“Heh... I get the feeling I’ll lose my life to fill your stomach one day. Just like this insane situation on my head right now!!”

It was unlikely even the calico cat on the girl’s head had given those fears as much thought as the herbivorous boy named “Kamijou Touma”.

Meanwhile, the carnivorous (or rather, omnivorous) girl named Index brought her hands to her hips while skillfully keeping the cat on her head.

“So what will we do?” she asked. “After coming this far, I refuse to back down from the oden.”

“...Let’s do it,” muttered “Kamijou” while rubbing his bitten head. His voice quickly grew to a shout. “We came this far, so let’s do it! I’ll throw this really expensive one labelled ‘Kyoto style’ into the basket! I’ll show you that I can come through when it counts, Index!!”

Part 5

“Kamijou Touma” was enjoying himself.

Every day was undeniably enjoyable. He would likely end up involved in all sorts of trouble and he would end up clenching his fist while covered in mud, but he could keep going because of this everyday life. It was this place to return to that allowed him to step deep into unexplored darkness.

Today would come to an end.

But he would have tomorrow.

And the next day.

And the day after that.

“Kamijou Touma” knew from the bottom of his heart that these enjoyable days would continue on and on.

Part 6

And as evening fell, a boy sat at a desk in the classroom.

He sat at the very edge of the very back.

No one had so much as looked his way and no one had found it odd for him to be sitting all alone.

He...

Kamijou Touma trembled while all alone.

“What...what was that?”

Everyone had surrounded someone else.

Kamijou Touma did not recognize the person known as “Kamijou Touma”.

None of the people around that other boy had noticed anything wrong.

And yet that “Kamijou Touma” had been a completely different person. His height and weight were different. His facial features and hair color were not even similar. There was no way anyone could have mistaken the two of them.

“You have to ask?”

A girl’s voice came from the teacher’s desk in the twilit classroom. The eyepatch-wearing Magic God sat on the desk while elegantly crossing her legs like the sort of female teacher teenage boys only saw in their dreams.

“That was ‘Kamijou Touma’s’ everyday life. Surely you recognize it.”

“That isn’t what I meant!!”

“For them, it did not matter who it was.”

Othinus spoke as if slowly explaining something to a student who refused to listen.

The chalk began to move on its own and wrote on the blackboard behind her.

A and B.

It wrote those two letters.

“You met various people in the past, resolved their problems, and expanded your circle of friends. From a god’s perspective, it was all a ridiculous farce, but those may have been praiseworthy acts for a mere human.”

“…”

“But their trust was established because you saved them, right? As long as they were saved, it could have been anyone, right? If someone other than you had been the one to save them, their trust and good will would have turned in that other person’s direction. Anyone could have become ‘Kamijou Touma’. It could have been a greasy middle-aged man or a dried-up old man. …What’s wrong? Had you deluded yourself into thinking you were the sole original in the world and no one but you could have walked down the path you travelled?”

Othinus spun her index finger around.

“No one was truly looking at you.”

The chalk danced about in sync with her finger.

“No one would be particularly troubled if you weren’t there.”

The chalk drew a large X over the A on the blackboard.

And it drew a circle around the B.

“As long as they had someone who could resolve their problems, their lives would continue on just fine. You decided to give up your life for such a shallow relationship. …How pathetic. You are worth nothing more than that. You are no different from a battery that is swapped out once it runs out of power. No one cares about the appearance or personality of a battery. And a battery cannot accomplish anything as only a battery. Nothing at all.”

Kamijou was unable to even feel a chill.

The world felt distant. Nothing felt real.

He was sitting in a chair, yet even his footing felt unsteady.

"*Remember what I said last time?*" said the female teacher giving a lecture on the end of the world. "Is there any need to so persistently risk your life for this? As long as it saves them, they would worship a piece of gum someone spat on the road."

Kamijou Touma remained silent for a while.

He silently looked around the lines of chairs and desks with no one in them.

It felt horribly empty.

It felt bleaker than a planet that had turned to desert after excessive development destroyed the environment.

He felt no salvation or warmth in that scene.

One might be able to live in that world, but living there held no appeal whatsoever.

"Can you still continue on?" asked Othinus with her legs crossed atop the teacher's desk. "Changing one simple point of view is enough to bring hell to the surface. If you insist on remaining idealistic, that's fine, but that will only lead to even more horribly intense darkness. You will break at some point. The very path you chose will break you."

"What good is denying it?" muttered Kamijou Touma. "No matter what anyone says, this is my world. I protected this. To someone known as a Magic God, it may only look like a tiny miniature garden, but it's valuable enough for me."

"Oh, really?"

Like a magic trick, a lance appeared in Othinus's hand.

"As long as I have this, something can be done."

"..."

"The world is a simple thing. You have seen what I can do. I can rearrange everything with the ease of pulling a dove from a hat on a count of three. After all, I am a god."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I am waiting for you to despair."

"Why? You can create as many new 'Kamijou Toumas' as you want."

“There is no meaning in tormenting a brand new doll. A new doll has no sins. Anything created by me, is not allowed to oppose me.” The blonde girl whispered with a delighted light in her one eye. “Despair over what once happened. Think back on it. If you do, I will return them to their proper form. I will give them back enough of their reason to feel sorrow when you are buried in your grave.”

Othinus might have been able to do anything to the world.

If she announced she would give him half the world, Kamijou might have truly been given his own country. One light wave of her lance might have granted the ridiculous wish of having every guy in the world as a friend and every girl as a lover.

But...

“That would be meaningless, Othinus.”

“?”

“You already said it yourself. Creating new dolls is meaningless. No matter how comfortable it might be, it would be empty. If you filled the world with those dolls and granted your every desire, you would find it all to be hollow. There would be nothing left.”

“Well said. But are you saying the scene before you is not mistaken? Are you saying nothing needs to be corrected and you should be abandoned to this loneliness?”

“*Yes*,” he immediately replied.

Othinus wrinkled her brow at the speed of his response.

That human boy did not hesitate to oppose the girl who had become a god.

“I was abandoned and someone I don’t even know has taken everything from me. ...But I have no right to insist on having things my way. They are free to do what they want and their decisions are valuable and should be honored. This is what it means for something to be beyond your reach. Having everything go exactly as you want would be all too hollow.”

“...”

“So, Othinus, if you said you were going to ‘correct’ everything that has left me, I would stand in your way. Everything here gives me nothing but pain, but that doesn’t mean I can force it all away for my own convenience!!”

Her eyebrows moved slightly.

This was the look of someone seeing a harmful insect moving after it had supposedly been crushed under their slipper.

“Let me ask you one thing before I crush you.”

Othinus spoke quietly with the expression of someone whose plan had gone awry.

“What will you gain from that?”

“Nothing,” he immediately replied once more. “I was never fighting to gain something from it.”

“I see.”

“And I may have been separated from them, but I can always rebuild those connections. Several of those relationships started out with mutual hatred and a lack of understanding, but we made it to a point where we could smile at each other. Those bonds are much, much stronger than you think they are. Just because ‘Kamijou Touma’ has stolen those bonds from me doesn’t mean I will never have a chance to create new bonds with them.”

“*I see.*”

Othinus brought that line of conversation to an end.

Her shoulders were trembling.

Kamijou thought she was suppressing anger, but it turned out she was suppressing laughter.

“Heh heh. That is quite a wonderful opinion you have there, but I have played a rather cruel trick on you. To be honest, I never thought you would come to this conclusion, so this is kind of awkward. It is not often that a god admits a mistake to a human. It is so rare that such instances are spoken of for the rest of that human’s life.”

“What?” Kamijou frowned while sitting at the desk. “What are you talking about?”

“Something quite simple.”

Othinus pointed toward the exit.

She pointed toward the hole of nothingness through which everyone had left.

“The boy who disappeared through there was referred to as ‘Kamijou Touma’ by everyone. He himself truly believed that he was ‘Kamijou Touma’. Only the two of us remain now. Your own assertions are meaningless here and all of my statements have been filled with ill will. ...Doesn’t that bring a certain obvious question to mind?”

“.....”

This was not good.

He could not let her continue speaking.

An unbelievably unpleasant feeling raced across every inch of his skin like some kind of disturbing insects.

And when Othinus spoke, her voice was filled with scorn.

"*Who is this lying pathetically at your desk? Who are you?*"

She seemed to be enjoying herself as she used the trick she had held in reserve.

"*Is someone who merely sits around complaining really the Kamijou Touma everyone knows?*"

Part 7

He no longer knew who he was.

Part 8

That boy...

"Kamijou Touma" sat in shock in the very corner desk of the classroom lit by orange light. His arms and legs hung limply down and his eyes blankly viewed Othinus's slightly altered world.

His breathing was erratic.

He grew negligent even in the bare minimum of actions he needed to live.

She was right.

In this twisted world where how people viewed themselves and others had completely collapsed, could he truly rely on a name?

His own concept of "Kamijou Touma" was no different from other people's concepts of "Kamijou Touma".

They could both be easily manipulated. He had just seen that very concept altered to a laughable extent, so why had he thought it did not apply to him as well?

If so...

Who was “he”?

He had truly believed himself to be “Kamijou Touma”, but who was he really?

“Hi there.”

The blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl’s voice seemed to come from outside the solar system.

He heard a light noise.

Othinus had hopped from the teacher’s desk to one of the empty student desks.

“Tell me your name.”

The Magic God hopped from desk to desk as if she were crossing a clear stream using the rocks sticking above the surface. She was approaching the boy.

It was a simple task.

And she finally arrived at the boy’s desk.

With her feet planted on the desk, she looked down on the puny boy from the heavens above.

“‘Kamijou Touma’, what kind of person were you originally?”

“...”

“As you filled with righteous anger and challenged a god for the sake of your friends, what kind of people surrounded you? Who did you abandon in order to protect someone?”

Unpleasant sweat poured from the boy’s face, back, and entire body.

“There had to be someone. It may not have been on the level of that ridiculous harem boy, but the ‘real you’ had to have had someone. Someone you wanted to protect with your life even if it meant fighting someone you knew you could not defeat. Where is that person now? Where are they and what are they doing while you are denying the ‘real you’ and insisting you are ‘Kamijou Touma’?”

All heat seemed to have left his body.

He was cold. A chill enveloped his body and threatened to freeze its core.

“Tell me,” said the Magic God. She toyed with the initiative. “As thanks for letting me kill some time, I will return you to your former position as long as you tell me your proper name. ...You can return to your friends, lover, and family. If you can find your ‘true self’, I will return you to the people who hold a connection to that ‘true self’.”

Silence followed.

The boy slowly raised his head, but Othinus was still standing triumphantly above him.

At some point a photograph had appeared between her index and middle finger.

“But having you choose from all six billion people on earth would be a bit much. To match your position as a mere human, I will give you a hint. Human entertainment is no fun if there is no chance of winning.”

The photograph fluttered down.

It slowly fell as if tracing the lines of her body and landed perfectly at her feet on Kamijou’s desk.

It was a class photo.

Needless to say, it showed “Kamijou Touma’s” class. The dozens of classmates were lined up on different stairs of a staircase and their homeroom teacher, Tsukuyomi Komoe, stood a short distance away.

“You are one of the people in that picture,” whispered Othinus. “You need only choose one of them. This is a much easier choice than having to spin a globe around, isn’t it?”

She was unlikely to hesitate.

This Magic God had given him this chance on a whim and she would likely mercilessly abandon him once she lost interest.

“You are one of them,” said Othinus once more. “If you choose correctly, I will return the correct answer to you. I will return your world, your life, and your existence.”

She said nothing about what would happen if he chose incorrectly.

The boy slowly looked at the class photo.

They all had flat smiles that looked like someone had stamped an identical seal on their faces.

None of them stood out any more than the others.

It simply looked like a large painting that was only complete with all of them present.

Even so, the boy focused on the half of the class where the boys were gathered.

“You cannot rely on sex,” cut in Othinus as if she had read “someone’s” mind. “Your appearance can be changed with the lance. Sex and age mean nothing in relation to who you originally were.”

“...”

She had mentioned age as well as sex.

In that case, Komoe-sensei standing a short distance from the group may have been a candidate as well.

“Do not worry about the time. This is your final decision. You can worry over it until you starve to death if you like.”

Both boy and girl were options.

Both student and teacher were options.

He had no information with which to find the right answer. There was no common scar or unique way of standing that he could look for. His only option seemed to be choosing at random. In Russian roulette, the odds of death were 1 in 6, but this was worse than that. Guessing right would be a rare occurrence.

His eyes hurt.

He was unsure if that was due to tears or sweat pouring from his forehead.

Yet his lips felt oddly dry.

He could almost feel the blonde girl watching him.

“I...”

“Someone” slowly spoke a name.

“I am Kamijou Touma. I am no one but Kamijou Touma!!”

As soon as he spoke, Othinus grimaced in utter displeasure.

This expression clearly held more danger than any other she had given.

She had lost interest. With a girl who had risen to the position of a god, that fact had to be accompanied by great fury.

Finally, she clicked her tongue loudly and sighed.

“When did you catch on?”

“…”

“Don’t tell me this is more baseless confidence or optimism not far removed from not thinking at all.”

“I had a hint,” he answered quietly. “You gave me a hint.”

“I did?”

“If your goal was nothing more than making me suffer, you would never have given me that class photo. That meant you had a reason to show it to me. Isn’t that right?”

“...I see.”

“You said the real me was in there, but you never warned me that it was someone other than Kamijou Touma. You were hoping to see me choose wrong when I could have easily chosen correctly.”

Also, she had said there was no point in creating a new “Kamijou Touma” and tormenting him.

If she saw no meaning in setting up someone else as “Kamijou”, the one she was torturing had to be the real one.

“So you saw through my malice. And here I thought it would be an interesting experiment in destroying your identity.”

“I don’t know how, but you wrote on the blackboard, pulled out that photo, and set up other tricks without using your hands. If I had given another name, you could have simply applauded and praised me. You could create as much false evidence as you needed to prove I had chosen correctly.”

As if interrupting or as if standing up from a theatre seat while watching a boring comedy, Othinus snapped her fingers.

The world vanished.

Kamijou Touma stood in a world where the ground, the sky, and beyond the horizon were all black.

He could not see the Magic God anywhere, but her voice slipped into his ear.

“It seems this was on too high a level for an idiot like you. I suppose having no worries could be called a talent when it reaches this extreme. I am honestly impressed you feel so little unease about yourself.”

Her voice resembled the almost exasperated surprise of someone watching a simple life form moving around energetically after slicing off a portion of its body.

“But how many cards do you think I have in my deck?”

“...”

“Do you think it stops in the mere tens of thousands?”

The next threat would soon arrive.

Between the Connected Points

He saw countless worlds and experienced countless forms of despair.

Some clearly cornered Kamijou Touma and attempted to crush him. Strange false accusations were forced onto him and a noose was put around his neck. He was stranded on a mountain with some acquaintances and he was forced to distribute his flesh to the others so they could survive until rescue arrived. He was lying unable to move on a hospital bed and was simply stuck like that all the way to his funeral. He was buried in humus and began to decompose while still alive, starting with the ends of the arms and legs. Earth was rendered unlivable and he was thrown into outer space to wander aimlessly in a capsule-like spaceship. As a puny human, he was destroyed by a giant robot or an asteroid.

The heart had no actual form, but Kamijou clearly felt his breaking. It was not being destroyed as if struck by a hammer or sliced in two by a sword. It was a quiet destruction as if termites had eaten into it and it was too late by the time the symptoms began to show.

Amid it all, he somehow managed to gather his thoughts bit by bit.

But he did not suddenly come up with a means of reversing or resolving the situation.

He was instead using his bloody hands to build a path there, piece by piece.

“You...”

He spoke quietly in his hazy mind.

"*You aren't actually destroying anything.*"

Othinus seemed surprised that he was only now realizing this.

The blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl stood directly in front of the boy.

"So?"

She was so close that he thought he detected a sweet aroma.

The world had become a vague marble pattern.

"There aren't thousands or millions of worlds. This is still our world. This whole time, we haven't moved anywhere."

"Why are you acting like you know what you are talking about? Also, I do not recall saying anything about parallel worlds."

He did not know how it worked.

But the world's point of view was changing. Othinus was changing it. Kamijou was merely experiencing what was around him, so it appeared to him he was travelling to completely different worlds.

Othinus spoke in a disinterested tone.

"Have you ever heard of phases?"

"...?"

"This world was not pure and untouched to begin with. Christian, Buddhist, Celtic, Indian, Shinto, Incan, Aztec, Greek, Roman...and Norse. The various religions have placed layer after layer of various phases over the world like thin veils or filters. There is heaven, hell, the underworld, the Pure Land, Yomi, the abyss, Mount Olympus, the fairy island, Nirai Kanai, Asgard, and many others. At any rate, the world you have seen so far has been viewed through various colors of cellophane."

"You haven't destroyed any of those colored glasses."

As his vision wavered and he was unsure who he was speaking to, Kamijou managed to keep his mouth moving.

"When it comes down to it, you are a person who creates. It may be filled with malice and it may be similar to representing 'crushing a house' as 'creating a pile of rubble', but it does not change what you are. You are a person who creates."

“Call me a god. And what I have done is simple. I have created new filters and placed them over the world so the world appears to have changed. That is why the world appeared changed to you. This is a lot easier than destroying everything and building it back up every time. *And your right hand contains the power to level out any foreign elements in the world, so it has difficulty functioning when I change the world itself.* ...Still, results are everything in the world. In the end, history will record it like this: the Magic God repeatedly destroyed the world and created new ones to make a single boy suffer as much as possible.”

“.....”

“*The man who names himself the Silver Star* seems to have been attempting to directly tamper with the ‘pure world’ beyond all the filters...that is, the world of science that is unaffected by religion. ...Honestly, you are quite fortunate to see this. Not even the Golden cabal of Europe that dreamed in Tibet was able to reach this point.”

Kamijou could not guess how much value this had.

If Index saw it, she might have felt differently.

But...

(She is the extreme form of one who creates. She forces unnecessary or mistaken gears into the world and that completely changes the scene before me.)

Kamijou Touma tightly clenched his right fist.

(That must mean Imagine Breaker is special to her. It destroys. It does the opposite of what a god does. This hand holds the possibility of erasing what is unnecessary. In that case, it should be possible to fix the gears that have been thrown out of order.)

Ollerus had said Imagine Breaker was the selfish dreams of all magicians.

If their twisting of the world produced a disadvantageous result, that reference point or restoration point could return it to normal or erase what was done.

And wasn’t this exactly such a case?

It seemed the filters Othinus spoke of were existences or concepts identical to heaven or hell. He was unsure if he could destroy something so massive. In fact, he could not even imagine what kind of phenomenon would be produced if he touched heaven or hell.

But there was a possibility there.

He still had a chance.

The thin, thin thread connecting back to the world containing Index, Misaka Mikoto, and the others had not broken yet.

“Oh, dear.”

Othinus cut in with an expression that said she knew exactly what he was thinking.

She spoke slowly and gently.

And yet a truly dangerous smile covered her face.

“Are you sure you want to reach for that last thread of hope?”

“What?”

“I am saying that hope and a chance of victory can lead to a fatal blow.”

He did not understand what she meant.

On the other hand, she seemed to understand everything just by looking at his face.

And she continued speaking.

“You will understand soon. You will understand all too well.”

CHAPTER 6

Shifting and Fluctuating World.

Version_Omega.

Part 1

"...Ah!?"

Kamijou awoke.

He had grown used to blankly wondering what had happened to him. It was similar to being punched so many times that his entire face felt warm and he could not distinguish the individual injuries.

He had been beaten to that extent.

His heart had been torn to pieces and threatened to scatter every which way. His instincts led him to desperately gather the pieces of his heart, but his own outline had thinned so much that he could not even remember how many pieces he needed to gather.

Even so, an external stimulus caused Kamijou's index finger to move. It was forcibly made to move just like when someone reflexively held a hand up to block a bright light from their eyes.

He was in a park filled with gentle sunlight.

He sat on a white bench and it seemed he had been sleeping while leaning against the back of the bench.

He wanted to wonder how long he had been asleep there, but he doubted the question had much meaning.

It was possible this place had been created the instant he had woken up.

This place was likely a cruel construction put together by Othinus as she watched on from above. Just like the ones before it, it would deny his very existence and strike him with a sense of helplessness.

Anywhere that initially seemed calm and peaceful would always bring thorough destruction in the end. His soul would be smashed by the sight of people he knew screaming and sinking into pools of blood.

And so he tensed up defensively.

After everything he had seen, he would not sit idly by and optimistically watch the change occur.

(I'll make the first move.)

His hazy mind focused on a single point in the center of his head.

He felt his circulation grow stronger throughout his body.

(Fortunately, I've been able to keep my memories this entire time. That gives me a chance to put together a means of resisting Othinus's seemingly infinite power. ...I'll save them. No matter what happens to me, I will return everyone to normal!!)

What would happen if his heart broke even once amid these many shifting and fluctuating worlds?

He had not given that any thought.

He had more important things to focus on.

Othinus would begin soon. Once it began, the destruction and collapse of the world could not be stopped. Fortunately, he was never made to wait for 100 years in a vast empty desert. She most likely did not want to wait around either. No human would try to kill an unsightly roach by caring for it in a bug cage until it died. This was the same.

He had to figure out what was going to happen.

He had to compare the different variations of destruction and calculate out Othinus's "range".

He had to find any common traits and determine what the Magic God's habits and dispositions were.

There might be a small hole somewhere.

There might be a thin, thin crack that was not noticeable at first glance.

Or there might be something tiny that not even Othinus had noticed.

There might be something somewhere.

(So don't look away. Face it head on. Face it and overcome it!! It doesn't matter what happens to me. It doesn't matter if these repeated scenes that surpass every limit end up frying my brain. I can't let her manipulate Index and the others any longer. I will return everything to normal and retrieve their honor!!)

He gathered strength in his entire body.

He began to spring up from the park bench.

But something else happened first.

"...llis."

He heard a voice.

It seemed to be speaking English, so he was unable to understand the details.

All he could make out was a name.

But no name would surprise him now. He had even seen a complete stranger being called "Kamijou Touma" by his class, but he had overcome it.

And so he knew he could overcome this as well.

But then the full name slipped into his ears.

"Wait up, Ellis!"

It was just for an instant, but Kamijou Touma's breathing most definitely came to a stop.

He completely forgot to stand up from the bench. He turned just his head and slowly looked toward the speaker.

A small girl with wavy blonde hair and brown skin ran by.

A boy ran ahead of her.

He recognized the girl.

(But...)

Wasn't Ellis the name of the golem belonging to the magician named Sherry Cromwell?

And didn't the name come from *a close friend of hers who had died long ago?*

"..."

Kamijou stared blankly – truly blankly – as the boy and girl ran off

And then he heard another voice.

It was speaking either French or Italian. Either way, it was a language he did not understand at all. Even so, he could tell the voice was happy.

He turned toward it and found a young girl and a young couple sitting on a plastic picnic sheet laid out on the green grass. They would occasionally pull sandwiches out of a wicker basket and happily eat them. Their expressions said the happiness came more from the situation than the flavor of the sandwiches.

The young girl had brown hair formed into thin braids.

Kamijou was reminded of the nun named Agnese Sanctis.

But had he ever heard anything about her having parents?

"It can't be..."

He gradually felt a large shadow form over him.

The girl known as Vento of the Front walked hand in hand with her young brother. The man known as Terra of the Left had not been executed by his colleague and drank iced coffee under the same parasol as the other members.

The woman named Oriana Thomson did not work as a magical courier and instead smiled with a few different children and old women.

"There you are, sensei."

That voice seemed to belong to Kumokawa Maria who wore a strange maid outfit. That meant Kamijou did not even need to check to know who it was she was had spoken to.

It was Kihara Kagun.

It was someone who had definitely died and should be dead.

"Reject it."

Those two words stabbed into Kamijou's chest.

The malicious voice belonged to the blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl named Magic God Othinus.

"If you insist that the changed worlds and the act of changing the world are evil, then reject this twisted world with no crime, debt, or broken hearts."

"..."

Othinus leaned in from behind the bench, pressed against him, brought her cheek in close, and almost lightly bit his earlobe as she whispered to him.

Kamijou said nothing.

He had no rebuttal to give.

"Destroying the world is easy. Either kill me or destroy the lance I use to control my power. I doubt a human can accomplish either, but it is at least worth trying. You will fail in either one and you will be unable to take everything from me, but you might create a bit of static. That would be enough to shatter this makeshift world created with an incomplete phase. You would be able to eliminate one of the worlds you believe to be so hideously distorted."

At some point, a lance had appeared in her hand.

That was Gungnir.

That spiritual item helped control a Magic God's power. It was the key to it all. It brought about changes to the world while ignoring the wishes of the very people it affected. That single point connected to the heart of the issue.

Othinus was embracing Kamijou's shoulders from behind.

And she was also holding the lance. This put it well within reach of his right hand.

Right now, he could destroy it.

"Hurry," quietly urged Othinus. Her long hair gave off a sweet aroma. "It is wrong to twist the world toward bliss. It is right to return it to normal. That is what you said and you are probably right. So show it with your actions. Test out your own idea of justice. Do it."

(Can this really happen?)

Othinus had been freely using her absolute power to manipulate everything. He had assumed she was an absolute evil. For her own convenience, she had repeatedly destroyed the world, brought people to ruin, and shown Kamijou hellish worlds of agony.

During it all, the thought of returning everything to normal had supported him.

That had been his goal.

But...

“I said this before.” As she watched this world of happiness, Othinus whispered in the trembling boy’s ear. “The world does not really need you. Even without you specifically, their dangers were avoided. The number of deaths, people’s groups of friends, the amount of people’s assets, and the headlines on the news may change a bit, but the world does not stop. People’s lives, jobs, and romances continue on.”

“…”

“You saved them in one way. I saved them in another. That is all. In this world, I stood up to those unreasonable incidents in your place. This is not an issue of good and evil. There is no use in arguing who was right. It is an issue of the options available and the actual results produced. Those two factors differ greatly between us. And that affects people’s lives, finances, love lives, and a lot more.”

“Then...”

The puny boy finally moved his trembling lips to speak.

“What have I been doing all this time?”

“You did well for a mere human.” Othinus’s answer was simple. “But did you forget? I am known as a god. I can save people in ways you cannot.”

That may have been the theory in various mythologies.

It might have been made more complex by the minds of those who believed in them.

But...

“That isn’t fair.”

“Perhaps.”

“Ellis was already dead by the time I met Sherry. It had happened twenty years beforehand. No matter how much I struggled, there was no way I could save that boy. I wasn’t even born then.”

“Then you did nothing wrong.”

“It’s the same with Oriana and Agnese. There had to have been tragedies I didn’t even know about. I can’t know everything about people’s debts and hearts. How am I supposed to save people from those things?”

“No one is blaming you.”

A paper airplane cut across in front of them.

A small girl chased after it along with some girls with the exact same face as her.

Kamijou turned in the direction from which the paper airplane had been thrown and saw two Level 5s.

They were the #1 and the #3.

This was likely a slightly different future where they had perfectly reconciled their issues.

“I couldn’t save them. It was impossible for me!! That’s right. Over 10,000 clones were killed. If I had realized it sooner, there might have been a different option!! It was my fault for accepting that. I just thought it was all resolved because I had saved the one or two people in front of me!!”

“*If you stop blaming yourself, everyone else will accept it.*”

“Then... What did my choice accomplish?”

The truly correct answer was likely the one before his eyes.

It was unreasonable and it required to cheat and turn back time, but Kamijou could not think of any answer better than that.

“Did my choice accelerate some tragedies? Is it possible I caused unnecessary deaths? Did I make someone suffer, did I force a great debt on someone, and did I destroy someone’s chance at love? I was satisfied and thought I had saved them, so what does that make me!?”

Was changing things truly evil?

Was returning them to normal truly good?

Could he still say that after seeing such a wonderful world?

Even if someone was controlling that world?

Othinus had protected the smiles Kamijou had been unable to, so was she in the right? Was this actually a form of just government rather than world domination?

A soccer ball rolled up to Kamijou’s feet.

Othinus gently removed her arms from his neck.

Freed from her grasp, he looked over.

A small form approached him.

It was a nun wearing a white habit.

“My ball...”

Hearing that voice, Kamijou instinctually reached for the soccer ball at his feet. As Index approached the ball, she almost looked like a puppy.

A few other people were visible behind her.

Stiyl Magnus.

Kanzaki Kaori.

And some priests and nuns he did not recognize.

“Oh,” he muttered.

Due to losing his memories, he had lost the actual events.

But he more or less understood based on his knowledge.

This was a future where they had not failed and had not had their role stolen by Kamijou.

“?”

As the silver-haired girl took the large ball from him, she looked at his face and tilted her head.

“What’s wrong? Does your stomach hurt?” she asked.

He figured he was making a very strange face.

Would something change if he reached out with his right hand and rubbed her head? Or would nothing at all change?

For an instant, his right palm trembled ominously.

“No.”

Kamijou formed a smile.

He quietly clenched his right fist on his lap.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Kamijou watched the girl’s back as she jogged away.

That sight of her joining another group had to be the one those people had seen so many times in the world he knew.

Had that really been a form of salvation?

Who had he been saving by continually providing those people this horrible sense of loss?

“Protect or destroy,” whispered Othinus as she sat on the back of the bench and leaned her back against his. “You can only choose one or the other. And that decision will affect not only you but everyone you know. It will decide everything for all of them.”

“What are you asking me to do?” asked the boy as he trembled. “You will save the world even if I don’t do anything. You just showed me that! So what do you want from me? What is there left for me to do in this utterly perfect world? What are you entrusting to me!?”

“It is quite simple.” Othinus’s tone was so carefree it almost seemed she would start whistling. “As you said, this world is perfect. Utterly perfect. Everything is protected by the golden ratio calculated out based on the assumption that Kamijou Touma does not exist. But think about it in reverse. Your mere presence here will cause a malfunction in this world. An unnecessary gear or a single wedge can obstruct the movement of every other gear. ...That is the current state *and it will soon begin to collapse.* I do not know if it will happen one second from now or one month from now, but it *will* happen. It will happen the instant this world remembers that you are still here.”

Magic God Othinus glanced at Kamijou with her one eye and gave her conclusion.

“Bring an end to your life. There is no other way to protect this world.”

“.....”

For an instant, Kamijou gave a relaxed expression that resembled a bizarre smile.

But anyone could tell he was definitely not smiling.

Othinus ignored it.

“I could kill you, but I am sure you have realized the problem with that. You have a way of somehow escaping dangerous situations brought about by external factors. Your inability to die when you should may be the greatest misfortune of all the misfortune you have been constantly exposed to. I can kill you with odds greater than 99%, but if you want to fill the gap and reach 100%, it would be faster to end your own life. That would be the most wholesome option for the world.”

Kamijou heard a quiet sound.

Something had fallen from the sky.

It was a loop of thick rope used to hang oneself. As soon as he realized what it was, more objects fell around him: a knife, a charcoal grill, a handgun, detergent, a car, pills, a thick plastic bag, a broken hair dryer, a silver sake cup, a knife in a wooden scabbard, a filled gas can, and clothes with rocks filling the bottom in place of weights. It was a colorful, comical, and surreal scene reminiscent of the raining sweets seen in a children's picture book.

"Choose on your own and make up your mind on your own. If you are prepared to bear it all, then you can battle me and destroy the lance. If you are not prepared to do that, then you must end your own life."

Kamijou slowly turned toward Othinus.

But she had already vanished.

The boy was left all alone.

The all-too-enormous weight of that happy and perfect world pressed down on his shoulders.

Between the Lines 5

The person thought about justice.

They had a feeling it was in some place as distant as the names of the extinct dinosaurs.

The person thought about peace.

They had a feeling it could be created even without justice.

One by one, the person gathered the conditions needed to create the scene in their head. While performing that work, they tilted their head. They thought back over it all from the beginning, thought it over from the beginning again, and finally came to a realization.

It seemed the person was an unneeded element toward bringing peace to the world.

The people the person knew would smile, those people would take the hands of people the person did not know, many things would develop, and the many problems that had piled ridiculously high would be thoroughly resolved. And after that shining ideal that looked like an example from a textbook was accomplished, there would be no place left for the person.

If the world had peace, it was likely that no one would complain.

If the world had peace, it was likely that no one would raise any questions.

If the world had peace, it was likely that everyone would ignore the process used to reach it.

If the world had peace, it was likely that everyone would rejoice at the result.

If the world had peace, it was likely that everyone would say it was right.

That equal and selfish answer would crush the convenience of an individual. But there was no other option. Justice had already been lost. Only the fossilized relics remained.

Needless to say, peace had great value. Past history proved it was worth considering the sacrifice of half the world just to acquire.

If it could be purchased with a single life, anyone would leap at the chance.

Historians would praise that great deed of mankind, a new number would be carved into the list of great dates, and even a holiday would be made.

All of humanity would smile as they committed that murder.

Grinning and armed with that theory, they would look away from the truth and rejoice in their lukewarm and unpleasant peace in which everyone forgot what justice is.

This led to a question:

Did the person wish to cling to a world like that?

CHAPTER 7

"A Normal High School Boy".

Black_or_White.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma could not move.

He could not even stand up from the white bench.

He had nothing left to guide him.

Even if he could move his legs to walk and even if he had the strength to clench his right fist, what could he do? After seeing such a perfectly correct answer and after seeing such happiness, did he still have the courage to interfere and charge in toward someone else's misfortune? It was true he may have resolved something. But there may have been another way. What if he could have travelled back in time and stopped those tragedies if he had only not been fooled back then and had known the answer from the beginning?

Anyone would have said that was nonsense, but Othinus had done it.

It may have been like seeing one's opponent's hand before playing one's own and it may have exceeded what any human could do, but it was obvious whose answer had been more "correct".

"…"

Evening had fallen.

The people gathered in the park had gradually left and Kamijou was soon left alone. Even so, everything he had seen there was burned into the insides of his eyelids.

What possible reason was there to destroy that?

Could he find a motive for fighting Othinus?

He wanted to return to his original world.

He wanted to return everything to normal.

He wanted to return to that normal everyday life he had believed would continue forever.

He wanted to take back the life of the boy named Kamijou Touma.

But...

He was the only one that wanted that.

He had believed that doing so was in everyone's best interest, but that had been meaningless.

If he had to weigh the wide world against himself, he had always known which one to prioritize.

Othinus referred to herself as a god, and she had produced a result that lived up to that arrogance.

If that god protected this world of peace, created the people's smiles, and behaved impeccably, what title befitted the person who opposed her?

There was only one answer.

"Yes."

Kamijou covered his face with his hands as he sat in the bench.

"If anyone should be called evil, it's me."

He could no longer move.

He understood, so he could not move.

No matter what else he did, he would only trample on everyone else's lives. The most he could do was feel he had saved them, but that self-satisfaction would destroy the balance of the world's golden ratio. He could not do that. That was undeniable evil. If he saw someone else trying to do that very same thing, he would set everything aside and try to punch them. And there was no way of justifying treating himself as an exception.

It was over.

He had wondered what would happen if his heart broke during the many subsequent worlds.

This was probably the answer.

He would lose even the bare minimum of what it meant to be a living creature, he would be unable to move even a finger, and he would begin to rot while still alive.

“But...”

Letting it end like that might also be evil. He could still do something for everyone. Othinus had said his mere existence would eventually cause destruction. It was possible she could simply create a new world, but there were some things that would still be destroyed: the smiles of Index, Misaka Mikoto, and everyone else he knew. And not just that. He also bore the futures of people he did not know. There was no greater happiness than this, so any change would have to be a negative. The role he had been given could do nothing but mess up a good thing.

If he had become a trigger for nothing but that, he should bring an end to it now.

That had to be the case.

After all, that was the undeniably “right” answer.

“I get it.”

So...

So...

So...

“I get it, Othinus. I’ll go find somewhere to die.”

Slowly and silently, the boy stood up from the bench.

The motion resembled a balloon floating up into the evening sky after its string snapped. His small back seemed to melt into that orange world.

The countdown of his footsteps began.

Part 2

How should he kill himself?

Kamijou vaguely pondered that question as he wandered aimlessly through the streets. The answer would change where he had to go. He had never given it thought before.

Othinus's comments had been right on the mark. He had become so used to experiencing such unreasonable misfortune for so long that no normal trouble would kill him. Whether he was aware of it or not, he would somehow avoid death.

If he chose his method poorly, he would survive.

And that would undoubtedly damage this world of peace and smiles.

In which case, he could not casually and impulsively decide his own fate. He had to think over it carefully.

He needed a method which left no room for survival.

Once he made the action, there had to be no way of turning back no matter how much pathetically he trembled and had second thoughts.

There had to be a clear point of no return.

He did not know when the destruction would occur, so he had to come to the right answer on the first try.

"..."

As he wandered on unsteady legs, he realized this place was modeled after Academy City. However, the cityscape was a bit different. Most likely, the things unneeded in a perfect world were gone and new things had taken their place. For example, the laboratories of the dark side that were disguised as private institutions.

The most noticeable change was the lack of walls around the city. If the disputes between the magic side and science side were completely resolved, they would be unnecessary.

As he wandered about, he glimpsed the faces of the people who had left the orange-dyed park. They were all returning to their own small worlds and grasping their own happiness.

He turned toward some loud voices and saw a four girl group sitting around a table through a large restaurant window.

"In the end, I think your short temper is due to those salmon bentos, Mugino. I don't know if you would call it chemical substances or chemical seasonings, but you need to watch out for any strong flavor like that!!"

"What? Frenda, I don't want to hear that from someone who eats canned foods year round."

“Come to think of it, you two eat salmon and mackerel. Why are you so super focused on seafood? Try to make your characters more super distinct.”

“...You two get along surprisingly well.”

A few more people walked by in front of Kamijou. They passed through the restaurant’s glass door and headed toward the girl group’s table.

“Nyah, nyah! What’s that delicious-looking stuff you’re eating, onee-chan!? Is it a new dish? Are they having a canned food fair!?”

“Fremea, I think she brought that in without asking. Look, the waitress over there is stiffly looking this way with a bitter smile.”

“Hamazura, you need to apologize for being super late! Also...those two are Komaba and Hanzou, right? Why is efficiency super dropping now that we got more underlings!?”

“Tch. That’s because Hanzou said turning back there was a shortcut.”

“Don’t blame me! It was because Leader Komaba wouldn’t leave that vending machine! Y’know, the one with the roulette!!”

“In the end, I can’t help but ask why my little sister is so attached to that extreme macho man.”

Kamijou had no intention of entering the restaurant, but the smell of food stimulated his hunger.

It seemed he still felt hunger at a time like this. He felt disgust at his own despicableness.

He patted his pocket and found he had his cell phone and wallet.

After walking a while longer, he found a food truck stopped on the side of the road. It seemed to be selling hot dogs.

“L-look, Sister Lucia! The hot dogs there are 2000 yen each! They must taste heavenly!”

“That is both gluttony and greed!!!!! A nun must not eat something like that!! Lidvia, you say something, too!!”

“Unfortunately, it appears Sister Orsola has already started eating one.”

The price was ridiculous, but this would be his final meal. He did not hold back and bought one along with a cup of soda.

After he received his food, a boy and two girls with brown skin passed by.

“Etzali, what are we going to do now?”

“Ask Tochtli. She’s the one that heard the commotion.”

“Wait. Don’t pass this off onto me. She’s practically your little sister and it isn’t easy calming her down once she starts pouting.”

As he sat on a guardrail and ate the food, he heard several voices from a nearby pedestrian bridge. First, he heard a gloomy teacher and a girl wearing a brightly-colored bee-like maid outfit. Neither of them noticed him.

“Sensei, what are we going to do now?”

“I hear an event is being held nearby. It appears to be a simple festival, but we should probably check it out.”

“Heh heh heh! Ha ha ha! So you mean this will be a festival date in yukatas? My Violence Donut is going to let out a roar!”

“You appear to have jumped ahead in the conversation like a scratched record, but try to calm down for now.”

Behind them were two girls with breasts larger than one would expect of students. They were glaring at each other so intensely it seemed sparks would fly.

They both had long hair. One had black hair that almost looked wet and the other had blonde hair that shined like honey, but they were both specialists at manipulating people’s minds.

“Don’t you think that was a bit much?”

“Oh, dear. I apologize, but I believe my comprehension ability is too poor to understand what you mean.”

“Oh, is that so? Is it that hard to comprehend that you shouldn’t recklessly use your Level 5 powers to cut in front of a line of elementary school children just to buy a hot dog!?”

“Ha ha ha. I told you I have poor comprehension ability☆”

Trying to kill himself with overconsumption of sugar and cholesterol would take too long.

After finishing his meal, Kamijou threw the containers in the trash and began walking through the orange city once more.

He passed by a woman in pajamas and a wheelchair and a girl with smartphones and other handheld devices hanging down from her neck.

“Oh, dear. As a Kihara, this peace is so boring.”

“Does it really matter? As long as we can play around with science, it doesn’t matter if it’s for good or evil. We might as well live in a way that fits this place. ...That is what a Kihara would say.”

“Anyway, did you see that project summary? We have to research and develop new standards for garbage disposal. What a joke. That won’t even take three days to finish.”

In a way, he was eliminating his regrets.

The process was similar to having a large number of hairs tangled up in the water and cutting them away one by one with a pair of scissors. Bit by bit, his body grew lighter and the ritual would prevent any recoil-like reaction when he tried to cross the point of no return.

(If I wrote a will, I might be able to gather my thoughts better.)

But there was no point because there was no one to read it.

As he thought, he heard the distant noise of a beating drum.

A group passed him from behind.

“Thor!! Hurry up!!”

“Wait, Marian. It just started, so there’ll be tons of people. Being a bit late would be perfect.”

“By the way, I spotted Bersi. He was secretly with that ringlet curl maid again!!!!!”

“Oh, wow... Well, that’s Bersi’s decision. Besides, you should probably give some thought to Mjölnir shaking next to you there. I think she’s gonna explode out of jealousy before long.”

Kamijou smiled slightly as he watched their backs disappear ahead of him.

It seemed all conflict had truly come to an end.

As Othinus had newly built up the interpersonal relationships throughout the world, it seemed some strange new connections had been made, but the current form was likely happier than the original form.

This world was created with pleasant feelings taking precedence over slight out-of-place feelings.

The festival was not being held at a Shinto shrine. Instead, festival stands had been set up along a large river in District 7. Overall, it felt more like a fireworks festival than a religious festival. And in the end, that fit Academy City.

“Wow!! shouts Misaka as Misaka gives up on trying to process all the information in front of her and just expresses her joy!”

“If you abandon any attempt to understand, it will stop our processing ability as well, so please try harder, says Misaka as she feels dizzy.”

“What the hell am I doing here?”

“What’s wrong with getting a little excited? Saving every last one of the 20,000 plus Sisters deserves at least this much.”

“But it does cost a lot! Look behind you, #1. All those clones are staring restlessly at the food stands!! And Misaka Worst-chan, that mass of ill will and foundation of the Third Season project, is egging them on!!”

Kamijou instinctually tried to find the sources of these voices in the crowd, but he could not. Instead, he spotted a man and woman wearing lab coats. They had nametags clipped to their chests. The tags read Yoshikawa and Amai. They were watching on with smiles on their faces and Kamijou guessed they were researchers of some kind.

“Ow! Honestly, this is too many people. And where did my onee-sama get off to!?”

“Yeah, it’s going to be impossible to find her with all these people who look just like her.”

“Oh, Uiharu. I just remembered. Is it true Arisa-chan is coming here in secret today? Y’know, that ‘perfect mode’ created once the two became one.”

“I saw that doll-like child president wandering around earlier, so she is probably here somewhere.”

He continued walking.

As he listened to the voices, he walked slowly through the festival built alongside the river.

He grew more convinced that his coming action held meaning.

He understood the weight of their smiles and what it was they had gained. This was not simply a number on a document. He learned that it truly was “here”.

And...

“Wait!”

Kamijou Touma heard a certain girl’s voice.

A small figure ran toward him.

She was a nun in a white habit that had golden embroidery as if on a teacup.

He knew this girl by the name of Index.

“Stiyl, Kaori! It’s wrong to only let me choose three things in this food paradise!! I’m already starving!!”

Kamijou raised his head of his own free will.

He wanted to burn the scene before him into his mind.

As the silver-haired girl ran out of the crowd, she held a calico cat in her arms. She had already spotted who she was looking for, so there was no hesitation in her actions.

And...

Without slowing for an instant, she ran right by Kamijou.

She had not been looking at him.

He heard voices behind him.

But the boy did not look back.

He had made up his mind now.

He felt as if he had seen what he truly needed to protect.

He began walking once more.

He followed the river downstream as he walked all alone through the lively festival. Beyond the cheerful voices and decorative lights, a large building towered above them.

That was his destination. He had to reach that roof.

It was not just the elevator or escalators within the building. The happy festival built along the river was also part of the stairway leading up onto the execution stage.

He walked slowly.

He entered the building.

He boarded the elevator and pressed the button for the roof.

As one would expect of Academy City, the elevator was silent yet quick, but it still took over a minute to arrive. He did not know the exact number of floors, but it had to be well over three hundred meters.

If he fell from the roof, there would be no kind way of describing what would happen to his human body.

Even if there were trees or a thick mat prepared by a rescue squad below, there would be no saving him.

“Yeah.”

And with a soft electronic tone, the elevator stopped.

The metal door automatically slid to the left and right.

“This should do it.”

A dazzling world opened up before him.

The sky was now closer to gold than orange and the wind refreshed his heart as much as a cup of water in the desert. He slowly crossed the roof to reach the edge. The area must not normally have been open to the public because it had no fence to prevent people from falling. Beyond the roof, the scenery was unobstructed. No world could have been happier. Every single light before his eyes seemed to praise youth and the festival music could just barely be heard up on the roof. He heard no harsh sirens of Anti-Skill or ambulances. He doubted they were needed anymore. That was why he heard none.

“This is the best possible spot to end my life, Othinus. I couldn’t make something like this on my own.”

He had desperately worked to resolve many different incidents in the past.

The Daihaseisai.

The Fuse Kazakiri incident on September 30.

The coup d'état that covered all of Great Britain.

World War III.

But what had happened afterwards?

He had not wanted to protect the world. He had not wanted to save something as exaggerated as "the human race". But had the short history after those events really been what Kamijou Touma had wanted? Othinus was the leader of Gremlin. If she had not caused such violence, it may not have turned out that way. But at the same time, would everything have ended happily ever after if Gremlin and Othinus had not acted? Really? Even if they had not appeared on the stage, someone else might have appeared to ruin that world.

In a way, Gremlin and Othinus had brought an end to that series of events.

No matter how many problems there were with their methodology, he could see the results before his eyes. That "someone" who Kamijou feared would most likely not appear here. Othinus would not allow for the "imperfect fluctuations" of misfortune or tragedy that were needed for that "someone" to naturally appear.

Even if it was due to unilateral control brought about by self-righteousness and arrogance and even if that tidy and sensitive god was not actually thinking about the individual people, her actions still brought about true peace and happiness. Even if they were being manipulated, everyone had been equally given success. In that case, the people would not care how it had happened.

Everyone wanted to be happy.

Ultimately, every human was attempting to move in that one direction.

It was not the methodology or process they wanted.

They wanted what was left in the end. They wanted that high score.

"..."

For a while, Kamijou stared off into that gold-tinged world.

Oddly enough, the boy still felt a bit of hesitation and fear toward the simple act of "jumping" despite having coming so far. He had spent quite a bit of extra time on the rite of passage meant to numb his senses, but he had been unable to rid himself of all of it. It somehow made him feel very pathetic.

No one would gain anything by him fighting this.

His opposition was nothing more than an empty desire. There was no logic or reason behind it.

He felt as if his heart had been scraped away bit by bit and he was now viewing what remained at the very, very end. That was this desire. This despicable desire. He had said so much about rescuing people or saving the world, but this puny desire was what lay hidden in his bottommost depths. This was why the Magic God had seen right through him. It was only natural she was disappointed in him. It may not have simply been Othinus's "attacks" that had left him with no place left. Why would anyone make a place for someone like this in the first place?

But that would end soon.

"..."

Kamijou slowly closed his eyes. The roof had no fence or railing. If he just stepped forward, it would all be over. He only had to imagine. There was a path before him. A path leading to that which should be in the form it should take. A single unnecessary piece had been mixed in with a giant puzzle and it could never be completed as is. So he would remove that piece. He would create a path and move that piece off the table. That was all he was doing. While thinking this, he accidentally smiled. Off the table. That seemed to be the answer. After forcibly rejecting his desires, all that remained was escape. As his heart trembled at the thought of annihilation, it seemed he was trying to move his heart "somewhere other than here". And yet no such place existed. That meant it would disappear.

He took a step.

With his heart numbed over as if it had been dunked in icy water, he finally managed to step forward.

He took a second step.

He moved forward. He walked down the path. He walked toward the result everyone had to want.

He took a third step.

With each step, he grew more used to the bizarre action.

There was no fourth step to take. Even so, he did not open his eyes. He would follow the same action and move his foot forward again. This would end it. There would be no miracles or coincidences. There was no way he could “somehow or other” be saved. Othinus had rejected that sort of vague concept. And so he would die. He would disappear. He would be no more. This was not a sweet story of taking a journey to a better place. He would simply be annihilated.

And he began to fall.

Part 3

Something happened just before he fell.

“Uraah /return!! I was trying to just sit by and watch, but give it a rest already, dammit /return!!!!!!”

Suddenly, a girl shouted at him angrily from behind.

Before Kamijou could do anything in his surprise, an intense impact struck his back. By the time he realized he had been hit by a dropkick and he opened his eyes, he had already flown forward and the gold-dyed cityscape spread out below him.

“H-huh /escape? Wait /return!! I was only trying to stop your suicide with a light tsukkomi, so why did I end up pulling the final trigger /escape!?”

The girl with the strange speech pattern seemed to be yelling out toward him.

“????”

He heard her while still flipped upside down.

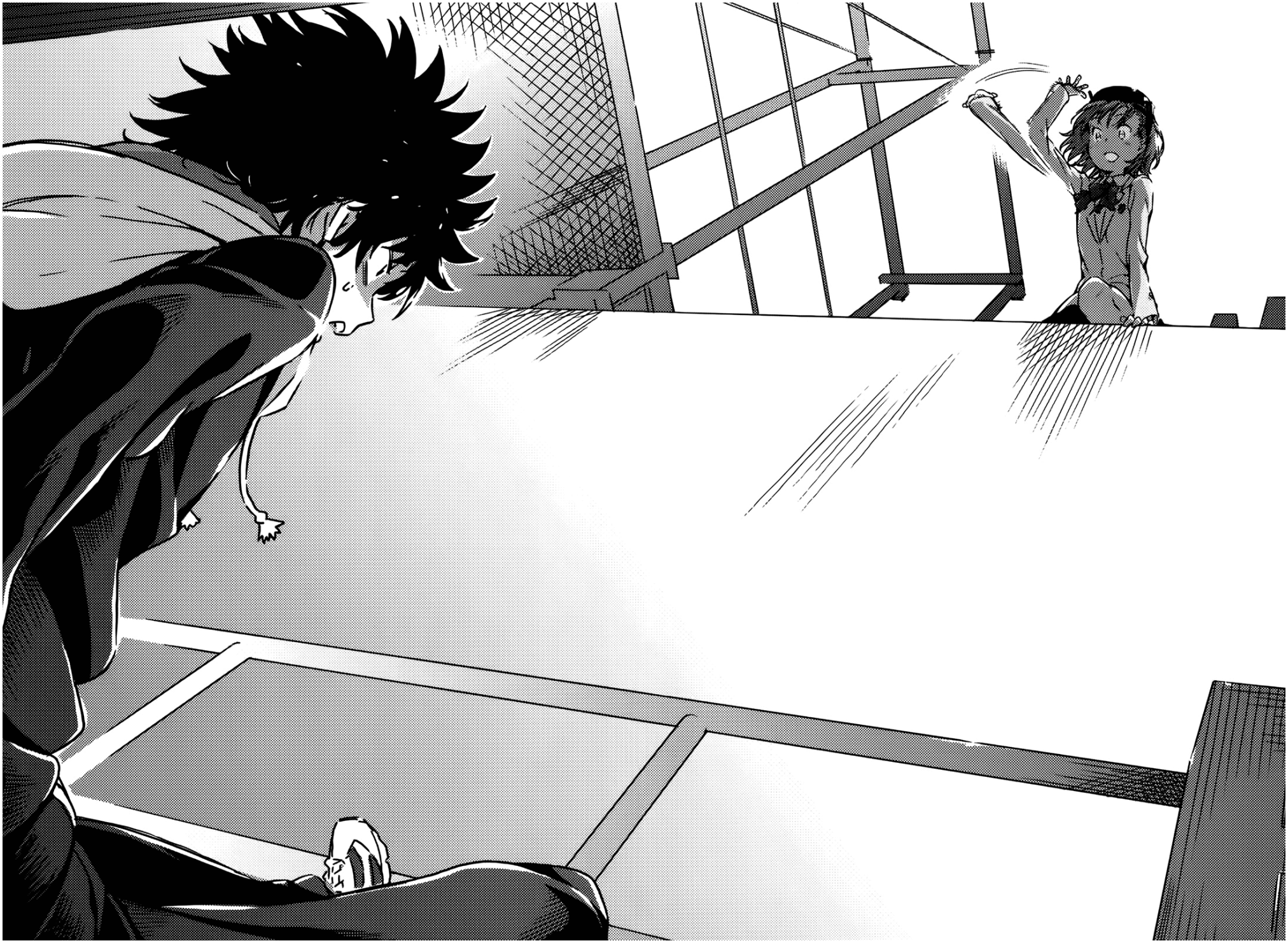
Yes.

Oddly enough, he was not dead despite falling from the high-rise building.

“What’s this /escape? Oh, you’re caught on the window washing gondola /return. Sigh, thank goodness /return. I thought it was all over before I even had a chance to begin /return.”

Someone was peering down at him from the edge of the roof.

She wore Tokiwadai Middle School’s summer uniform, had short brown hair, and had unrefined military goggles on her forehead.



She was not Misaka Mikoto.

She was...

“Misaka...Imouto...?”

“Wrong /return!!” The girl used her arms to form a large X mark. “You made this mistake back during that incident too /return. You directly met two of the Sisters /return. The one you saved was #10032 or Misaka Imouto /return. And the other... /return.”

“#10031.”

His vision seemed to twist around.

Speaking that name and speaking with her caused him to realize anew just how great a deed Othinus had done.

“The Sister I just barely missed saving...”

“That’s right /return. But /backspace, I’m technically only borrowing her body, so you have no reason to blame yourself over this /return. Still /backspace, we all form a single large will together, so anything I say is the same as hearing it from her /return.”

“Wait a second. Do you mean...?”

The Sisters.

That large number of military clones.

A single large will formed from all of them.

“This is the first time you’ve actually met me, but you’ve done a lot for my physical terminals /return.”

“She” bowed her head as she spoke.

“I am the large will created by the whole of the Misaka Network /return. Nice to meetcha☆ /return.”

Part 4

“Like I said, it seems Othinus has free control over the life and death of humans, but I think she has two distinct pieces of software, one for the living and one for the dead /return. Like a god, I guess /escape? Like a heavenly world and a human world /escape?

Like heaven and hell /escape? It might be based in a religious concept I don't really understand /return."

"..."

"But I'm a single organic system created from 20,000 units, y'know /escape? Or if you want to get technical, 20,001 units /return. There's also that Third Season, but that's not my territory /return. She's more like someone that's hacked in, so I don't really accept her /return. Anyway, the network forming me contains information from both the Misakas who are currently still alive and the Misakas that are currently dead /return. In other words, I'm alive while dead and dead while alive /return."

"..."

"If you look at the entire system of 20,000, about half of the cluster has been taken out, but don't think of it like an apple sliced in half /return. It's more complex than that and it's all mixed together like Schrödinger's cat /return. I know it's more romantic to think the moon doesn't exist anywhere when no one can see it, but I'm in a strange state that no normal human can reach even when having a near death experience /return."

"..."

"That means you can't call me part of the living or the dead /return. And Othinus only has software to handle those two cases, so I slipped through the cracks and she can't manipulate me /return. Unfortunately, I can't be certain about any of this because it's related to technology from outside Academy City /return."

"..."

"Hey, are you even listening /escape? Please don't tell me you think you'll be praised as a good listener if you just sit there silently /return. Cause it has the opposite effect /return. You need to try to drag the conversation out of me /return! Excuse me, sensei /escape? This guy's silence is too much for me /return."

The girl borrowing #10031's body had been talking on and on and on.

It was as if she were releasing pent up resentment after keeping her silence until now.

This kind of machinegun conversation was usually only seen when meeting a seldom-seen relative on a holiday.

The two of them were sitting on the bed and floor of a white room with only the furniture that came with the room.

It was Kamijou Touma's student dorm.

Or rather, the empty room that *should have been* his student dorm.

“This shining sky that’s all about appearances isn’t like you /return. I’ll take you somewhere much more Kamijou Touma-like /return.”

After that comment, the girl known as the Will had led him here.

It was nothing but an empty white room.

That rectangular space symbolized Kamijou’s current state.

That bleak empty space contained not even the slightest scent of Index or the calico cat who had lived with him.

The golden light entering through the window formed shadows and complete darkness would fall before long.

“If I had to guess...” Kamijou finally spoke. “I’d say the software that manipulates the living and dead is based on the Einherjar spell. The spell was only able to move dead bodies without them rotting, but she must have updated it to its perfect form with the lance or something.”

“Nnn, are you talking about the world known as magic /escape? I’m not too good with the occult /return. Well, even I’m still human, so I don’t really understand things like ghosts /return. ...By the way, this isn’t an English textbook, so could you stop only responding to direct questions /escape? You’re talking to a girl here /return. Do you really get that /escape!?”

These two foreign elements existed within the perfect world the Magic God had created.

There was no way Othinus’s calculations had accounted for this.

But Kamijou could not simply rejoice.

He was unable to decide on his own whether he should or not.

“...Why are you here?”

“You were being really spineless, so I came to punch you /return. Back when that Lightning God Thor guy came by, he really pissed me off and I wanted to challenge him to a lightning competition /return. But now I kind of understand how he felt /return. There are times when you just feel like punching someone☆ /return.”

Despite the outrageous comment, she had a giant smile on her face.

Plus, she had already kicked him once which had almost killed him.

After coming this far, Kamijou wanted to avoid another fight like his one with Thor.

(And looking back on it, what was the deal with that fight? Did he just want to fight? If so, I want to go punch him for letting his obsession with fighting get in the way of what mattered.)

At that point, Kamijou came to a realization.

Worrying over that sort of thing no longer mattered.

The boy known as Thor had found happiness in this world. Digging up the past would help no one. In fact, the boy might not even remember it.

This was a world of all sorts of happiness.

And it rejected everything Kamijou Touma had done.

“So what will you do now /escape?”

He was blocked at every turn.

The stage had already been perfectly set.

Anyone could have seen that, but the Will of the Misaka Network asked that question almost nonchalantly.

Kamijou could not figure out what she meant.

“What?”

“Let’s try this again /return.”

She spoke as if repeating a shopping list to a child who had lost the original list.

“*Now that you know this is a perfect world of nothing but happiness, what will you do /escape?*”

“Wait...”

“To be blunt, are you sure you did a proper job of searching for a way out of this /escape? Are you sure there is not a single contradiction in this ideal world Othinus has created /escape? I wouldn’t be so sure /return. An amateur high school boy like you struggled the best an amateur high school boy could and managed to survive this far /return. If you put your mind to it, you could manage something /return. In fact, my very presence here is something /return.”

“Wait a minute!! Why would I try to turn this around? I’m not talking about whether I *can* do something. Turning this situation around won’t accomplish anything. If it will only cause everything to collapse, why do I have to fight!?”

“Hmm, I think you should only talk about whether you can do something or not when it leads you to a more positive line of thinking /return.”

The Will borrowing #10031’s body tilted her head disinterestedly.

Her concept of life and death may have been a bit off.

“And did you really not realize this would eventually happen as soon as Othinus gained god-like powers /escape?”

“…”

“Dictators are still human /return. If they can do whatever they want, they will make their own ‘home’ as pleasant as possible /return. *And that’s what she did /return*. Simply put, that’s what happened here /return. She removed any tragedy from her surroundings, removed all conflict, removed all failure, and removed all objections /return. ...However /backspace, is there perhaps a kindness that had to be completely eliminated in this world of happiness /escape?”

“I understand,” muttered Kamijou. “After seeing the battles in Hawaii, Baggage City, and Tokyo, I understand that Othinus isn’t the type to worry about the people around her. She didn’t create this new world out of concern for them. She didn’t do away with tragedy because it was making people sad. ...*It was an eyesore*, so she corrected all of humanity’s problems as if burying the tragedy out of sight. I understand that much.”

“And /escape?”

“But that still saved everyone! She even saved people I couldn’t save!! This world has no blood, tears, death, crime, debt, or broken hearts. After seeing all that, can I really say it’s right to return everything to normal? That would be evil. It would be right but evil! I would be robbing all of those smiling people of their smiles and lives just to take back my own place in the world!!”

“Perhaps /return.” The girl known as the Will did not try to avoid the issue by using ideals. “But /backspace, can I ask you something /escape?”

“What?”

“Were you ever fighting because it was the right thing to do /escape? Were you ever punching people because they were evil /escape?”

Kamijou hesitated to answer.

And the Will smiled.

“Of course not /return. You could’ve done that, but you didn’t /return. You never used that card when it would have helped, so it makes no sense to let it crush you under its weight the instant it becomes a problem /return. If those were the rules you were playing by, you don’t need to suddenly change the rules now /return. Whether something is good or evil means nothing when it comes to what you will entrust your life to /return.”

“But that reasoning will only save me.”

“Don’t lie /backspace.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the Will lightly rebutted Kamijou’s spat out comment.

And she continued before he even had time to be taken aback.

“You’ve already caught on, haven’t you /escape? Othinus cheated in one very boring way /return. And I’m not talking about leaving you alone unsaved /return. She made one extremely simple change to all of those who she has set up to look saved /return.”

“...”

“If you were too stupid to realize this, I doubt you would’ve lived this long /return. Subconsciously, you started hoping that Othinus is right /return. That’s why you’re doing your best to avoid looking at *a certain point* that you had to have already noticed /return. ...I won’t tell you the answer /return. After all, I’ve already given it to you without saying a word /return.”

There was indeed a tiny aspect of that scene in the sunny park that had felt wrong.

But what did that matter?

This result existed in reality, so that aspect did not change the score.

“There is a meaning to it /return,” said the Will quietly as she sat on the simple bed. “Even if it doesn’t change the result before your eyes, its presence or absence completely changes the situation, so it does have meaning /return. To put it another way, why are you hesitating to say it /escape? If Othinus has truly created a perfect and ideal world, nothing you say should create any cracks in it /return.”

“Well...”

“Like I said, you really do understand /return. If you put it to words, it will create a crack /return. And you’re afraid that small crack will cause this seemingly perfect world to come crumbling down /return. But /backspace, that very unease proves it /return. This is not an ideal world /return. It’s just that this one trick meant to make it look that way is preventing you from judging it properly /return.”

“That isn’t true.”

Index had been smiling.

Stiyl and Kanzaki had not lost her.

The Sisters had been smiling.

Misaka Mikoto and Accelerator had been washed of the sins they bore.

Ellis had been smiling.

Sherry Cromwell had never held hatred toward science.

Oriana Thomson, Vento of the Front, God’s Right Seat, Kumokawa Maria, and people Kamijou Touma did not even know had been saved from the incidents, debts, and broken hearts that would have plagued them.

The source of it all may have been twisted.

Someone who had seen both the before and after may have found it strange.

But their smiles could not be said to be false.

Kamijou doubted he could create happiness greater than that.

That scene was not something that a mere high school boy could selfishly destroy.

“That isn’t true. Othinus accomplished it perfectly. This isn’t some strange illusion. We aren’t satisfied with seeing something that isn’t actually there. She truly did save everyone. She did what I could not.”

“Then prove it /return,” readily said the Will. “If this is truly a perfect world and nothing anyone does can cause a single crack in it, then prove it /return.”

“…”

Hearing her words, Kamijou slowly shut his eyes while sitting on the dorm room floor.

And he covered his face with his hands.

It was evening.

It was the short span of time when day turned to night. In the society of children, it symbolized saying goodbye. And in that orange-colored world, Kamijou Touma slowly breathed in.

And he spoke.

"*They don't remember the original world.*"

Part 5

Yes.

It was a simple issue.

A very, very simple issue.

Index, Stiyl, Kanzaki, Mikoto, Accelerator, the Sisters, Sherry, Ellis, Agnese, Oriana, Vento, and everyone else had accepted the current scene as normal.

Normally, they would have been deeply moved by the scene.

They might very well have embraced with tears and snot covering their faces.

And yet they had acted like they knew nothing other than this.

They had not known how precious and irreplaceably valuable the things they were experiencing were.

But...

"What does that matter?" asked Kamijou Touma. "No matter what they think, they really were saved. That doesn't fall under the category of being tricked. Having their memories or not changes nothing."

"What are you talking about /escape? It changes everything /return," said the Will in exasperation. "Then what about everything up until now /escape? You weren't risking your life for anything obvious like money or power, right /escape? Occasionally, you even turned your back on those things as you fought for something more formless /return. So it makes no sense to change the rules here /return. If you're suffering under a handicap, then play by the rules you used before /return."

"..."

"Othinus was afraid /return." She readily spoke of what was going on in the heart of the Magic God who had truly become invincible. "But not that people would find it strange that dead people were standing before them /return. After all, that wouldn't really matter to them /return. Having someone you care about alive is better than having them dead /return. They might question it, but they wouldn't reject it /return. It's the same thing you did /return. If an unreasonable situation is working in your favor, you tend to think it's okay to accept it /return. Until it shows its negative side, that is /return."

"Then..."

"There's one major negative side here /return."

As she spoke the Will of the Misaka Network pointed at a certain boy's face.

Yes. Kamijou Touma's face.

"If everyone remembered the original world, everyone who was saved here would be unable to accept losing you /return. That is what Othinus feared /return. It isn't just a positive /return. Once they knew about this obvious negative side, some of them might reject this perfect world /return. It was that thought that led Othinus to cheat in such a boring way /return. I'm pretty confident that's what happened /return."

For an instant, the boy had trouble determining the meaning of what he had just been told.

The girl smiled when she saw his face.

She seemed to find it funny that he could not understand something so simple.

"You seem to be thinking about protecting everyone's smiles by casting aside your place in this world /return."

"..."

"But there are quite a few people who would not like it if they lost you /return. To be honest, I'm one of them /return. Then again, the ones who haven't even realized it might have the most charm /return."

She was not simply being idealistic.

Othinus and Gremlin had always kept that in mind while making their strategies.

At Hawaii, Baggage City, and Tokyo, they had drawn out the dark sides of people's hearts, torn apart the trust between supposed allies, and distributed what people had to gain so that people could not use the power they actually had.

They had never ignored the slight strengths that people held.

Whether it was a bloody race for rescue gear and boats on a sinking ship, a deadly fight over the last remaining food in a snowed-in mountain cabin, or any of the other tragedies so commonly seen in dramas and movies, *nothing that complicated would actually happen during such extreme situations in reality*.

Kamijou and the others had proven that.

The end of World War III proved it most of all.

No matter how hopeless the situation, people could get along.

"Just imagine /return," she said. "Let's say all of the conditions are met and all of the people who have been lost can be brought back, but you will be lost in exchange /return. Nothing says everyone would readily accept those terms /return. Some people would probably carefully weigh the two options and worry their way through the decision /return. Some people would probably reject the salvation hanging before their eyes /return. Othinus feared that /return. She was absolutely terrified of everyone gathering together to save you, so she hid that fact /return. By hiding that possibility and your situation from them, she made sure they would not think beyond the happiness they have /return. To be blunt, that wasn't fair /return. She cheated /return."

Just because people stood in an extreme situation did not mean they could make an extreme decision.

When presented with the unconditional return of the lost lives, anyone would praise Othinus.

But what if a clear sacrifice was needed in exchange?

What if they were told to exile the boy named Kamijou Touma or tear him limb from limb?

Would they accept that fact and live in their world of happiness? Could they move on to their days of happiness as if nothing had happened and with no sorrow at all?

"They would have broken /return." The Will spoke as if she could see into people's hearts. "If they knew their current happiness was created by killing and burying an innocent boy, their hearts would break /return. Of course they would /return. It was because you could not allow that sort of thing to happen that you stood up to countless unreasonable situations regardless of good or evil /return. This is something you were never able to accept, so are you really willing to happily force it onto someone else /escape? That doesn't make sense /return."

Kamijou Touma did not know how much weight his own existence held in other people's hearts.

After seeing everyone smiling happily in a world without him, he had honestly assumed it must not have held much weight at all.

No matter how far he went, he was nothing more than a normal high school boy.

There were six billion people in the world, so he had felt there had to be tons of people who could do what he could and tons of people who could do even better things.

"That doesn't matter /return." The Will's muttered words seemed to cut off his thoughts. "It may have been something simple that anyone could do /return. It may have been a coincidence that you were the one that came across it and anyone else might have made the same choice if they had been there /return. If A and B were swapped out and someone else had saved them, they might have ended up surrounding someone else /return."

She spoke of a truly trivial fact that meant nothing to the world as a whole.

"But at that time and in that place, the one who recklessly ran in and saved them was you /return. Even if anyone *could* have done it, it was you that *actually* did it. And everyone is thankful /return."

Kamijou Touma could not move.

And the Will slowly continued.

"You would be saved /return. Getting your just deserts doesn't have to be a negative thing /return. The path you have walked so far would save you /return. Everyone might worry over the issue, cry their eyes out, and occasionally get into fights over their precious people, but they would definitely save you in the end /return. ...After all, they're not bad people /return. Even if they got a little twisted and went a bit nuts in the past, they weren't too insane for you to find a foothold toward reaching an understanding /return. So in the very, very end, everyone would rush to you /return. If they knew you were about to be crushed by all the smiles in the world, they would cast it all aside and join you /return. They would do exactly what you have done all this time /return."

"..."

"And so Othinus took away that option /return. She changed the settings so you could not receive your just deserts /return. That's not right /return. It doesn't make sense /return. If it's okay to just change what people think, then she could have just made everyone happy with a world full of corpses instead of bringing those people back to life /return. That's how low a level she's cheating on /return."

He did not reject the Will's words.

He listened to them and thought them over.

But...

"That just makes it even worse..."

"What /escape?"

"If this was a truly perfect world that can't be cracked no matter what, it might be okay to try to do something. After all, I'd know it would fail. But if there is a contradiction in this perfect world and there is a foothold toward breaking through, I definitely can't go along with that! After all, they might reject all this. They might reject this happiness that they could normally never get back again! I can't make them do that!!"

"Hm," muttered the Will as she kicked her feet back and forth while sitting on the bed. "Maybe you're getting stubborn because this has to do with people's lives /return."

"What?"

"So let's think about this more simply /return. Let's set aside all that confusing stuff like the morality and mystery surroundings human life /return."

She then moved in close to Kamijou as he sat on the floor.

She approached so close that their lips were just about to touch.

And she spoke as if challenging him.

"Does it really not bother you that Othinus just appeared out of nowhere and stole everything you had built up /escape?"

It was a simple question.

A very simple question.

And that was why it stabbed into Kamijou's exposed heart without anything to soften the blow.

He remained silent for a while.

The sun had completely set and stars twinkled in the sky.

It was not that time had sped up.

That was just how long he froze up.

And finally...

Finally...

Finally...

Kamijou Touma slowly moved his trembling lips.

Tears spilled from his frozen tear glands.

And he spoke.

Part 6

“It bothers me.”

Part 7

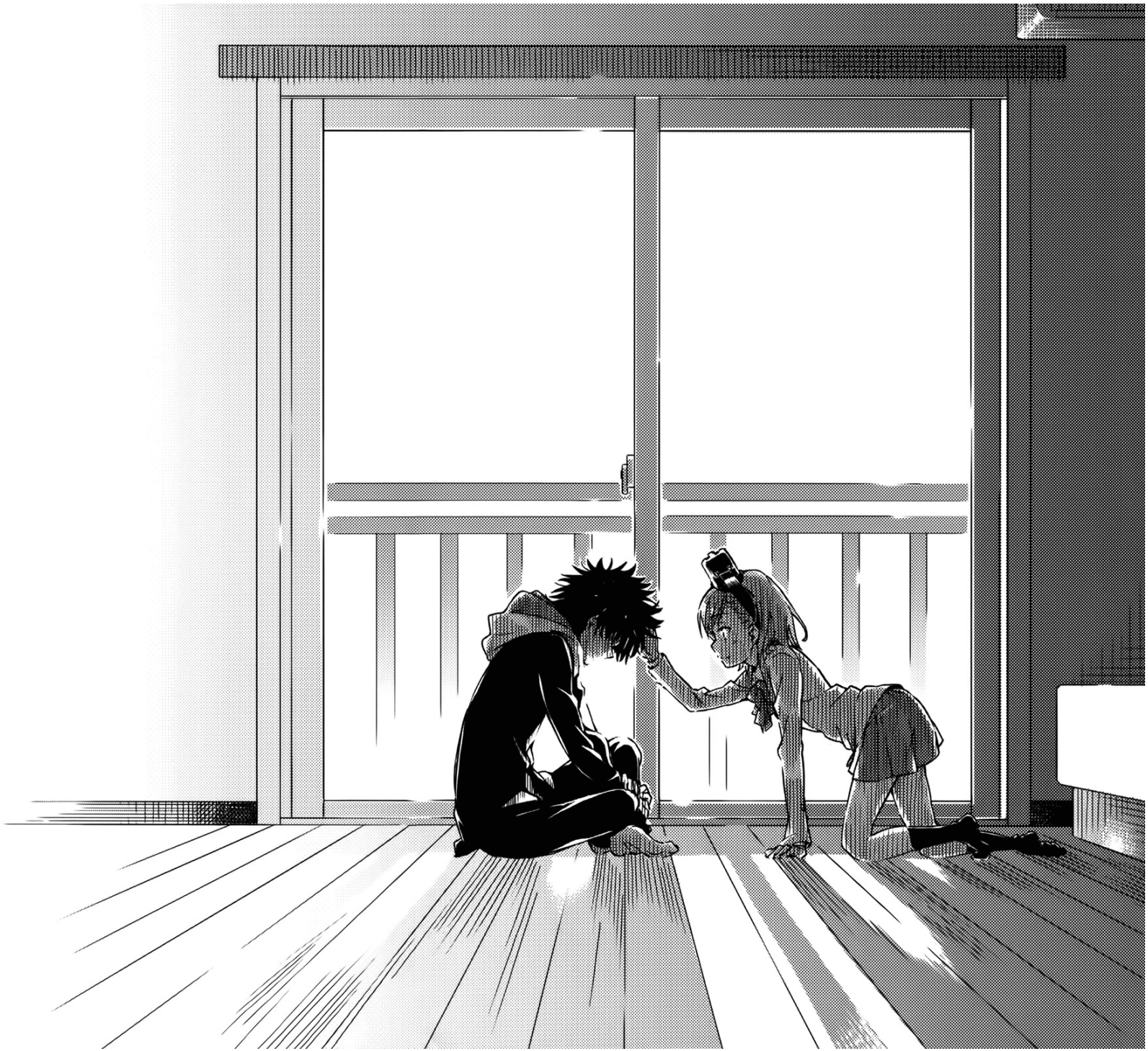
“Of course it bothers me. Of course it bothers me!! What was I doing all that time? I didn’t want some huge sum of money and I didn’t want to make my own kingdom with a ridiculous amount of power. I just wanted to wake up in my dorm, make food for Index, go to school, and hang out with my friends after school. I just wanted that normal life back. So why do I have to be treated like an absolute evil!? That’s ridiculous. Othinus saved every last one of the six billion people on earth to make me suffer. There’s something seriously wrong with her sense of scale! Why the hell do I have to go through all this? What was I calling misfortune!? I had always managed to slip past all that and used every trick I had to reach a compromise. I had managed to strike a nice balance! But she destroyed it all. Of course it bothers me! Even if it’s meaningless and no one else cares who it is as long as they’re saved, it still bothers me!! I coughed up blood and shed tears to somehow make my way along that path, but Othinus easily did it like it was just a game! She stole everything from me!! She stole everything I had – even the path I walked down – and she did it so skillfully that I feel stupid complaining about it!! What the hell was that? If she could do that, why didn’t she save everyone in the first place!? If that was an option, why didn’t she use it more seriously!? And I doubt it will even last that long. Once Othinus gets bored, she’ll just destroy this world too. If you can easily create something, you have no problem with destroying it. But I can’t create anything better than this. It doesn’t matter what complaints I make when she can give everyone a smile with a wave of that lance. And this isn’t someone else deciding that it doesn’t matter. It’s me! Me!! She showed me it doesn’t matter if I oppose her!! It’s all a deception created to corner me, but it doesn’t matter to me if it’s all fake!! It’s almost like a game to her, but the smiles she’s given Index and the others are something I could never give them even after a century of hard work. I couldn’t do it without inventing a time machine, but she did it without even

trying. Am I supposed to stand up to that!? Why did someone like her have to appear in front of me!? If she was going to do this, couldn't she do it on the other side of the planet? No, why couldn't she create this paradise on the moon or Mars and be happy there!? She could leave all the people here alone and create a new human race on a desert planet she made livable!! ...I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to oppose a monster like that. I was never fighting because I wanted to. It's just that I always saw someone holding back tears in some horribly painful situation. Even if they cried and cried, no one would have complained, but they put up with it anyway. ...And I couldn't allow it to go on. I clenched my fist like an idiot, charged in, and somehow resolved the incident. I didn't do it to be thanked. I didn't do it because I wanted anything in return. But overcoming those things increased the number of people around me. I began to think those connections with people had some kind of meaning!! And this is where it got me. I had everything taken from me. As you said, someone might rush over for my sake if they knew. They might cast everything aside and join me even if it meant making an enemy of this entire world run by Othinus. But! That doesn't matter!! It never mattered. That tiny illusion is not worth abandoning this miraculous situation where lost lives have returned. I wanted to have fun with everyone some more. I never bothered to realize how comfortable my position was. If nothing had happened yet and Othinus suggested bringing back all those lost lives, I would probably have rejected it based on some random ideal or another. I would say their deaths had meaning or that you can't toy with people's lives so easily! But she's already done it. To 'return things to normal' now would be no different from killing those unknowing and smiling people with my own hand!! No matter how many excuses you make, that fact does not change. A decision that I make would kill every last one of them!! There's...there's nothing I can do. What good is it to take away this world without crime, debt, or broken hearts!? Even if I defeated Othinus, returned everything to normal, and justly slaughtered everyone who shouldn't be alive, would I really return to the world I picture in my head? How would I ever face the people who are living their normal lives, ignorant of what had happened? Could I really just smile? Could I really smile like an ignorant fool when I really knew the truth!! Like hell I could!! Nothing would remain for me either way. Whether I defeat Othinus or not and whether I live or die, I can't return to 'normal'!! No matter what happens and no matter how this ends, there is no way for me to succeed. Even if I don't 'fail' in whatever I choose to do, I will still have complaints and it will all fall apart in the end. In that case, there's no reason to fight!! Why should I destroy this miraculous situation!? If every path leads to destruction, why not just accept Othinus's victory? Why not let the number of people saved decide it!? Who saved more people, me or Othinus? The answer is obviously Othinus!! I knew from the beginning I couldn't hold a candle to what she did!! What else can I do? After...after everything she's done, there's nowhere left for me to go!!!!!!"

Part 8

The Will of the Misaka Network listened quietly while sitting on the bed in the dark dorm room.

She silently accepted the many words that gushed from Kamijou Touma's heart.



It was certainly not a beautiful thing.

It was certainly an ugly thing.

But...

“To be honest, I’m a bit relieved /return,” she said. “If you had still responded like a perfect saint after everything I said to you, there would have been nothing more I could do /return. I would have decided I had been wrong about how humans work and I would have given up /return.”

“Then what are you telling me to do?” spat out Kamijou. “The situation isn’t going to change no matter how much I shout or rage. I can’t outdo Othinus. If I destroyed everything here and returned to the original world like nothing had happened, the weight of my sin would crush my heart. There’s no point in doing that.”

“Probably /return,” readily admitted the girl known as the Will. “After all, this was done by a god /return. As a resident of the science side, I don’t entirely understand, but *she has probably entered a territory beyond my own* /return. My processing power is nothing to laugh at, but I doubt we could come up with a better answer even if we had nice a brainstorming session here /return.”

“Then...”

Kamijou began to protest, but the Will cut him off.

“But /backspace.”

She said it so readily and simply.

“Let’s move back a step /return.”

Her tone made it clear she had wanted to say this from the beginning, but Kamijou had been unable to keep up.

A slight look of irritation showed she had been waiting to arrive at this point.

“Why do you feel the need to unconditionally place yourself below everyone else /escape?”

He did not know what she meant.

As he stared blankly at her, she rubbed her index finger against her own temple with a twisting motion.

“There’s nothing wrong with deciding for yourself who to prioritize /return.”

She readily rejected everything up to that point.

“There’s nothing wrong with prioritizing yourself just this once /return.”

The Will who had seen death more than anyone else spoke.

“If you think you should rescue everyone equally and you think you should hold out your hand toward anyone holding back tears as they suffer through an unreasonable situation, you should save yourself as well as others /return. There is not a single thing wrong with that /return. Call it conceited or whatever you like, but that isn’t something you can easily weigh and pass judgment on /return.”

“…”

“That is how you have always lived /return. That plan to create a Level 6 by killing 20,000 clones could have been justified when faced as an issue of good or evil /return. But /backspace, you would never have allowed someone to simply weigh the numbers against each other /return. And you must know of some actions that were not justified in the grand scheme which still saved a few lives and hearts /return. That isn’t the issue /return.”

“Yes,” said Kamijou Touma.

It was not that he had accepted the Will’s opinion.

He was afraid to accept it.

If he did, he would be letting go of the miraculous situation here.

“But if I returned to the normal world like that, I would be destroyed. As I continually forced a smile in front of everyone who knew nothing, I would eventually be unable to stand it anymore.”

“Perhaps /return.”

Once again, the Will did not deny it.

And she continued.

“But that just means you don’t have to hide it /return. Who says returning to the original world means you have to hide the fact that you didn’t save everyone /escape? That’s just you not wanting to disappoint them /return. Isn’t that right /escape?”

Hearing that, Kamijou smiled a bit.

He felt as if the issues at hand were gradually coming into view.

“They’d kill me.”

“Then apologize /return. Tell them everything and apologize /return,” she said casually. “That’s what you’ve done all this time, isn’t it /escape? When great tragedy built hatred in your powerful enemies’ hearts, you solved it all, one by one /return. This is no different /return. You brought an end to an entire war like that, so you can return everything to normal no matter how bad it gets /return. In fact, doing it that way would be a lot more like you /return. It’s much more like you than putting on a fake smile because you’re afraid of angering them and ultimately wearing yourself down on the inside /return.”

Kamijou sat motionlessly on the floor for a while.

In this world, everything and everyone but him had been saved.

But needless to say, it was a world that would bare its fangs toward him.

And so...

“Is that really okay?” he finally asked.

The girl known as the Will was listening.

“Can I really oppose this dazzling world for nothing more than that?”

“You can /return,” she immediately replied with a smile. “If there truly is no way to return to the original world where you praised your youth, then why not destroy it all and build those relations back up from the beginning /escape? Relationships do not always improve /return. Sometimes they decline /return. But /backspace, it still counts as a victory if it all works out in the end /return. Let’s keep it at that /return.”

The Will of the Misaka Network sounded carefree as she spoke.

“Also /return.” She paused for a moment. “I was the one that urged you on, so I’ll stick with you if they get mad at you /return. Even if they treat you like an evil demon king, we can start out as just the two of us /return. And then you can work to gradually reclaim your shattered circle of friends /return. It won’t be easy, it will leave scars on the most sensitive part of a person, and it will directly affect the survival of people around the world /return. But /backspace, it will all work out in the end /return. I’ll stick with you until it does☆ /return.”

He could not see into the future.

No one could say what would happen.

Choosing to be destroyed here was likely the most overwhelmingly right decision in the history of the world, and Kamijou Touma was an absolute evil for fighting against it for his own hopes and desires that he refused to abandon.

But...

“I want to...”

As he hung his head down, a quiet voice escaped Kamijou Touma’s lips.

This time, the boy truly let out all his pent-up tears as the words spilled out.

“It may be conceited and it may not make anyone else happy, but I want to go back...”

Some might have called it evil.

But those were the tiny feelings of a normal high school boy. They were horribly wretched, pathetic, and worthless, but this was the true voice of his exposed heart.

The girl narrowed her eyes slightly.

He simply could not abandon that desire.

Even though he knew it would bring misfortune to others, he could not let go.

And the girl did not think it was a bad thing. In fact, if he had easily given up based on documents filled with systematic measurements, she would have been angry.

Yes.

She had actually been sulking up until now.

It was a very human thing to do.

“That settles it /return.”

The Will shrugged and gave her conclusion.

She was as carefree as someone suggesting to stop somewhere on the way home from school.

“Go surprise that true god who got a bit carried away with her perfect victory /return.”

“...Yeah.”

Kamijou Touma slowly stood up.

His eyes focused on a single point: the dorm room door.

What he had to do had not changed. He had always passed through that door when charging out into the wide world.

“It’s time to bring this to an end. It’s time to fight a god.”

The simple sound of the door opening and closing seemed to continue on forever.

Part 9

The Will of the Misaka Network had watched that boy’s back as he left.

She was now all alone in that empty white room.

In that dark rectangular space, something like white glowing flower petals floated through the air.

“Honestly, you don’t make this easy /return,” she muttered.

Her short hair glowed white as if coming apart at the ends.

Her body was a borrowed one. It belonged to #10031.

Something invisible scattered as if peeling away from that physical body.

The Will had actually had a much faster way of motivating that boy to fight.

She was a thought entity created in part from what was learned in the deaths of over half the 20,000 clones.

By saving all of the clones, Othinus had greatly twisted the Will’s form.

As things were, her very existence would not be erased, but she would change into “something else” as if the data were being overwritten.

And so she had only needed to say one thing.

Please save me before this world crushes me.

(But it would have been all over if I had said that /return.)

That would likely have been enough for the boy to tightly clench his right fist. No matter how many enemies it would have made, he would have willingly accepted the burden of all those sins to save the Will.

Also, she was an existence created by gathering the consciousnesses and egos of more than 20,000 Sisters. She had recorded their state of mind in their final moments and perhaps even for a few seconds after their deaths. In other words, the idea that "only the dead could truly understand the feelings of the dead" did not apply to her. The Will could have lessened the burden on Kamijou Touma's heart by drawing on the feelings of the Sisters and telling him what they had been thinking.

On top of that, the Will's data included a few recordings of the words and actions of people he knew well. She was a collection of espers who could manipulate electricity, so she could have burned the voices of the people in the former world into a cell phone's memory or a hard disk. That might have been enough to stimulate his emotions. What was real and what was false had long since been overturned. If he grew angry that the "voices" he was hearing were being treated as false, he would have easily regained his strength to fight.

But she refused to use those methods here.

She had hidden those cards.

Something resembling white flower petals peeled away from the borrowed body and scattered through the dark room.

(If he had to rely on me here, that boy would certainly crumble eventually /return. He needs to stand firm here, so I can't spoil him now /return.)

Before long, the Will would be blotted out.

In a way, it felt much more repulsive than simply dying.

As one who had indirectly experienced death over ten thousand times, she really could make that judgment.

"Now, what should I do /escape?" said the Will bluntly.

She was temporarily saying goodbye to this world.

She had to decide on her final words.

"I won't say I'll see you in the *next world* /return."

She smiled a bit.

“See you in the *original world*, Kamijou-chan /return.”

Part 10

She had wavy blonde hair and white skin. A large black leather eyepatch covered half her face, so only one green eye was visible. Witch-like designs had been added into her outfit in places, so her silhouette showed a pointed hat and cape.

She was Magic God Othinus.

She stood in the schoolyard of a high school in District 7. It was a symbol of a certain boy’s everyday life. It was no exaggeration to say this world had been created solely to crush Kamijou Touma from the inside, so it was an important point. It was a pole of that world with more value than both the north and south poles.

She had of course noticed the presence of someone who should not be there.

“I went out of my way to provide you with a ‘last meal’ before your execution, so what is with that look?” she spat out. She spoke with a clear irritation in her voice. “You have mistaken your position here and lost your way when you should have died. Everything is already settled. Are you not even a little ashamed that you are still breathing?”

She glanced over at another form standing in the center of the schoolyard.

Someone was approaching this important point.

A single boy was entering this symbol of an everyday life he needed to protect.

Othinus spoke quietly as she glanced over at him.

“So what has gotten into you now?”

“Something you wouldn’t know about.”

That was all it took.

Magic God Othinus had already seen through it all, so she did not refer back to this world where Index, Misaka Mikoto, and the others had gained their smiles. She did not try to use them as hostages so he would back off.

Instead, she waved her slender arm horizontally.

At some point, a large lance had appeared in that hand.

It was Gungnir.

It was the symbol required to control her massive power as a Magic God.

“I am sick of trying to crush an idiot with the world.”

She narrowed her one eye.

“If you will not break, then I will kill you. I may achieve more stable control if I transfer Imagine Breaker to a more fragile container and break that.”

Between the Lines 6

The conclusion had been reached.

There were no more words to be spoken.

They had no interest in the shifting worlds and they had found no value in a peace that held no justice.

They would accept the sin of turning their back on it.

At that time, two singularities existed there.

They were close yet distant. It was only natural that they would never come to an understanding.

Nothing would remain after victory.

Even if they won, the world they longed for would not arrive.

Nevertheless, they could not stop from fighting. They were not fighting in order to gain something.

Their honor and pride were on the line. For both of them, that was enough.

What would be gained through victory and what would be lost through defeat?

What would be lost through victory and what would be gained through defeat?

Did they understand the conditions?

Did they comprehend the threat before their eyes?

The battle began.

No excuses were necessary. They would fully enjoy this battle of individuals for individuals and by individuals.

CHAPTER 8

Girl Phase, Hundreds of Billions.

Create_V.S._Break.

Part 1

Everyone knew from the beginning that he ultimately did not stand a chance against her.

It only took an instant.

Othinus did not even take a single step.

By the time Kamijou Touma tried to dash forward with his right fist clenched, the situation had already decisively changed.

Something exploded right in front of him.

“ ..... !!!???”

The explosive noise arrived late and Kamijou felt it through his bones more than his ears. By the time his comprehension caught up, he was flying high through the air like a soccer ball.

This result had to have already appeared in Othinus's head.

All Kamijou had managed was to slightly alter the trajectory of his flight and the spot he landed in.

He remained in the air for several seconds.

His time there was clearly too long for a human-sized mass. What did that mean?

Before fear could devour reality, his back struck the dirt of the schoolyard.

Without exaggeration, a massive amount of dark red liquid rose from his organs and spewed from his mouth.

♦

Ksh

Ksh

♦

He had trouble breathing.

Even as he tried to draw in air, it felt like something was clogging the path.

“Cough!! Cough cough!! Cough!!”

While lying on his back, he rolled to a crawling pose and stuck a finger deep into his throat. He had lost a lot of blood, but securing his windpipe came first. He coughed up the sticky fresh blood clogging his throat and somehow managed to breathe in.

“What’s wrong?”

The blonde girl’s voice slipped into Kamijou’s ears.

It sounded much, much more distant than before.

“I thought you liked simple battles. So why are you moving back rather than enjoying yourself?”

Othinus never moved from that one spot.

She merely held up her lance.

That was all.

A giant hole opened in the night sky.

It looked like a pitch black moon.

Something had split open. Kamijou caught a glimpse of that evenly black world he had seen before.

No warning was given.

That moon merely fell toward the schoolyard to crush a single boy.

♦

Ksshh

Ksshh

♦

Kamijou leaped to the side with all his strength. He could not worry about appearances. He merely rolled along the dirt to move even a centimeter or millimeter further from that whirl of destruction.

All sound vanished.

A hemispherical crater ten meters across appeared in the ground. This was not the scar left by an explosion. That space had been carved away in the exact shape and size of the black moon.

(I need to get close.)

A fierce light resided in his eyes.

He moved from defense to offense.

After switching over his train of thought, he sharply altered his direction as if switching the position of his feet around.

(I need to find a way to get close to her!! If I can get right up to her, she'll have to let up on the massive attacks for fear of hitting herself! I only have my fist. Whether I'm attacking or defending, I can't do anything without forcing down my fear and moving in to-...)

"Too slow."

Othinus's lovely voice was accompanied by *the sound of Kamijou's knee bending in an odd direction.*

♦

Kssshhhh!!

Kssshhhh!!

♦

Kamijou Touma used both his legs to charge forward at top speed.

He was right in front of Othinus. Fortunately for him, he was still in one piece. Just one more step. As he clenched his fist and came into range, he let out a short breath. He judged the timing, cut down his extreme tension as much as possible, and did not hesitate to put his entire weight behind the blow aimed at the eyepatch-wearing girl's face.

And then Othinus vanished.

The next thing he knew, the blonde girl had moved up so close to him that they were almost touching.

The action she took was quite simple.

The lance was in her right hand, so she used her slender left hand.

With a horrible creaking noise, she grabbed Kamijou Touma's neck and unhesitatingly lifted him up.

♦

Kssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Kssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

♦

"*Just realize it already*."

"*I already have*."

Kamijou Touma and Othinus's gazes crossed for a moment.

Yes.

When it came down to it, no matter what Kamijou Touma did, he could not stand up to a Magic God like Othinus. This was not an issue of training his body further or coming up with the right idea to turn things around.

On a more fundamental level, a human could not defeat a god.

The one slight possibility of defeating Othinus through strength alone would be for Kamijou himself to ascend to Magic Godhood, but that was not much of a hope. It was not something so easily done and she would not call herself a god if it was.

And so...

“This wasn’t an even fight,” groaned Kamijou while held up by the neck. “This isn’t the first time we’ve had this fight. I don’t know if this is the tenth time or the hundredth time, but we’ve repeated it again and again. And each time, I was probably blown to pieces by the first attack. The only problem left was the integrity of my memories. I subconsciously refused to accept the pain and fear I felt, so I rearranged the memories in my head to look like a fight following a single path. *That’s what made it look like I was somehow holding my own.*”

“That answer is worth 50 points.”

“Perhaps. Is this schoolyard not the starting point? *Do I have to start from the empty black world I first woke up in?*”

One hundred times, one thousand times, or even ten thousand times.

Othinus merely had to repeat this. Each time, Kamijou Touma took slightly different actions and made different choices than the time before. Once he ran into a dead end doing that, he would break. It might happen in the direct battle or in one of the countless worlds. If just once, the boy wandered into a dead end and collapsed, Othinus’s objective would be achieved.

But at the same time...

“But I gradually realized something.”

“What does a human have to say to a god?”

“No matter what happens, you won’t kill me,” declared Kamijou while a vice-like grip squeezed his throat. “It’s not that you can’t. If you wanted to, you could at any time. Yet you haven’t. *Even when you have announced you would.* ...There has to be something there. You could just kill me and end this, but you have some reason not to. If I had to guess...”

“...”

“I’d say it’s something like bonus points.”

He said nothing more.

With an odd snapping noise from his neck, Kamijou Touma’s consciousness was overwhelmed with static once more.

♦

Kssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!

Part 2

Now for a hypothetical story.

Say there was someone with the wonderful power to save and load as much as he wanted like in a video game. Say that person became a detective and tried to stop an unavoidable plan to exterminate humanity that would begin in exactly one week.

Who has the advantage there? The detective or the criminal?

Normally, one would think the detective has an overwhelming advantage due to his strange power. No matter how many times he fails, he can always try again, so it will never end until he wins.

But that is not necessarily how it would end.

After all, after making countless attempts, the detective's mental exhaustion would be on an entirely different level. Even if each attempt is only a week long, four tries is about a month and twelve sets of four is a year.

What if he continued for years or even centuries and was never able to stop the destruction?

The direct competition between the detective and criminal would not matter.

After choosing to rush into the cage of time, wouldn't the detective's heart break and be crushed?

Yes.

The detective with the power to save and load would have another option.

When faced by too great a challenge, he could switch off the game and give up.

♦

In the end, Kamijou Touma's battle was the exact same thing.

Magic God Othinus could control everything. Without exaggeration, she controlled the world itself. If she wanted to, she could have galaxies collide to kill Kamijou Touma. Or she could break the bonds between the particles making up his body and cause his very existence to disperse. If she was the slightest bit dissatisfied with something, she could turn back time, re-lay the rails of fate that led to the future, and create the exact result she wanted.

He could not win by fighting normally.

Just as the eyepatch-wearing girl had said, there was too great a difference between the basic specs of a human and a god.

Any *external* stimuli from Kamijou Touma or a third party could never defeat that monster.

But what if Othinus herself created a situation that would crush her from *within*.

And she had made a certain comment before the battle began. She may not have realized it, but she had certainly said it.

"—I am sick of trying to crush an idiot with the world."

She was sick of it.

It might sound like an arrogant or prideful comment. But after Othinus had risen to the territory of a true god, nothing ordinary should have been able to do any mental or physical damage to her. There had been something already there which made her feel that way.

How many repetitions had Kamijou accumulated before he realized this?

It was as if a cup had already been filled to the brim and he merely had to wait for the instant in which the surface tension reached its limit.

The level of internal damage that threatened to crush Kamijou Touma was nothing but a slight scratch to that monster, but what if she had already reached a point where that scratch was enough to begin the collapse?

It was a matter of persistence.

Kamijou Touma could not rip a single victory from her grasp.

But there was a possibility he could earn one by losing enough times.

Part 3

Othinus heard a noise come from her head that sounded like her very skeleton creaking.

It almost looked like small snakes were squirming on the inside of her face's skin.

This was the pulse of her blood vessels.

(His rate of exhaustion should be greater.)

They had repeated this tens of thousands of times, hundreds of thousands of times, and even millions of times.

All so that puny boy would fail just once somewhere along the line.

(I of course have the more accurate continuity of memories, but he still retains fragments of memories. And ignoring the amount of pure information, the static of pain and fear ensures he will break first. He is nothing more than someone who does not know his place. The more he clings to the hope of a victory that will never come, the greater the shock when it vanishes before his eyes. That is when he will break. He has merely walked down the path of destruction of his own free will.)

It was a simple truth that required no real thought.

And even if it required no real thought, thinking about it would not change its truth.

And yet...

"Why won't you break!? Have you lost sight of what you are doing after reaching the verge of death so many times? Surely you aren't the type of person who will proudly state he is an idiot!!"

Othinus shouted in irritation.

It was rare for a human to enrage a god to this extent. At the very least, it had never happened in Gremlin. The confrontation with Ollerus in Sargasso had been close.

It seemed the Magic God now saw this boy as equal or even greater than that other opponent.

"Why would I break now?" In that nighttime schoolyard, Kamijou Touma insolently answered the magic god he faced. "I just have to overcome this. *You just have to break once*. That gives me hope of continuing on. I might be able to regain the place I had lost. As long as I still have even a 1% chance, I'm not going to break!!"

"..."

This situation was beyond help and it surpassed the mercy of a god.

Just as she lightly bit the edge of her lip in irritation, half of Kamijou Touma's body was blown away like sherbet.

“And while going along with this, I’ve started to understand the heart of the issue. I’m not being unilaterally defeated. As long as I can accumulate the information in my head, I can slowly analyze the situation.”

In the next battle, that was all he could say before his torso was sliced apart.

Just to say those few sentences, he had wandered the pitch black world, traversed seemingly infinite worlds, and experienced countless forms of pain, fear, and despair.

How could he withstand it?

These were true hells with a density great enough to drive any normal person insane before they could overcome even one. And reaching this point did not release him from it. After saying nothing more than that, he was smashed by Othinus and forced to repeat all of the infinite apocalypses he had finally overcome.

There was no hope in that.

Connecting his fragments of words to form a conversation would not change anything.

On a fundamental level, he was not winning.

Not at all.

He had no assurance Othinus would break if he repeated this tens of thousands or even hundreds of millions of times. He had no foundation to support his theory. Not to mention that a human and a god had fundamentally different specs. It was no different from writing data to an old cassette tape and a cutting edge hard disk at the same time and seeing which would fill up first.

“This is like two mirrors facing each other.”

And yet...

And yet...!!

“This world which you can freely alter is like creating an infinite landscape by setting up two mirrors to face each other. Saying you have the ability to freely walk through that landscape sounds like something from a dream, but if you took a stroll using that ability and turned back, your face would pale. After all, the exact same world would continue infinitely. There would be nothing to act as a landmark. Where had you come from and where should you return to? You’d naturally start to get worried!!”

She used an invisible power to split that impudent boy’s top half from the bottom half.

But in the next battle, Kamijou Touma continued talking as if nothing had happened.

However, that did not mean he did not remember. He knew what had happened, but forced the memory down and continued speaking.

“Othinus, I have a fundamental question for you.”

She stabbed him with the lance. She smashed open his skull with the butt of the lance. In what looked like a joke, she hit a home run using the handle of the lance.

But that insolent human boy would not stop speaking.

He felt the fear, but he continued to challenge this god.

“A long time ago, before you gained Gungnir, before you took your spot at the top of Gremlin, before you ran across the non-standard monster named Ollerus, and before you took the name Othinus...”

She smashed him!!

And crushed him!!

And destroyed him!!

“*Did you make this mistake?* Did you gain a wonderful power and charge forward without thinking to look back? And as a result, did you not know where to return to?”

Part 4

Kamijou Touma was not very knowledgeable in the occult, so he had no way of knowing, but this is what history said:

It was said belief was initially centered on a hammer-wielding lightning god, but it shifted to a lance-wielding god of war at some point.

It was said the god of magic had fulfilled a contract by sacrificing his own body by hanging himself from an ash tree.

It was said the Norse god that became the origin of the name Othinus was a muscular one-eyed old man with a huge beard.

Each of those was “unmistakably true”.

The occasional discrepancies between accounts were nothing more than differences in interpretation between the many different compilers.

But what if the past compilers had made no lies, misunderstandings, or speculations and had only sincerely and accurately written down what they had actually seen?

What if there was something that drew a straight line, connecting all of the fragmentary information?

Didn't a certain girl's labyrinth possess both the power and nature needed to accomplish that?

Part 5

"That would explain most of it," said Kamijou Touma slowly.

His slaughter at Othinus's hand had stopped at some point.

"I was crushed in world after world, but you never rejected or took away the Imagine Breaker in my right hand. That means what I think it does, doesn't it?"

She was a Magic God, so the human lifespan did not necessarily apply. Ollerus had spoken as if he knew what he was talking about, but he was nothing more than a human. Even if he knew a thing or two about gods, he may not have understood the true scale of it all.

Simply put, it was possible Othinus had been a Magic God long, long before what Ollerus had spoken of.

Had that power resided within her all that time?

Had she cast aside her own power at some point?

"I don't know the details of this whole 'phase' thing, but you have the ability to freely change the shape of the world like clay. Due to that, you completely forgot what world you originally lived in. You desperately tried to create a world based on the scenery you remembered. You added in and removed phase after phase. ...And this was the work of a god. It was probably so close to perfect that no human could tell the difference. But as a god, 'close to perfect' wasn't good enough for you."

After seeing the world she had created with her own power, she had turned back without meaning to.

Given that, she must have feared her own power. If she had truly accepted it with nothing but joy, she would not have tried to turn back.

"In a later era, you wanted the lance and you wanted to alter the world. That must have been because your unease came back. You were concerned that your supposedly perfectly-

made world was not so perfect after all. You wanted to work some more on the artwork you had already presented to the public. I don't know what you did to regain the power you had cast aside, but something must have happened for that know-it-all Ollerus to hate you so much. ...You longed for the next world because you wanted to add another layer of paint to the canvas. That would explain your internal conflict."

"..."

"Yes, internal conflict. You weighed A and B on the scales and could not decide which one to go with. You had another option whose value rivalled that of the new world. Isn't that right?"

Kamijou Touma lightly thrust his right fist forward.

He held out Imagine Breaker.

He thought of its original meaning.

"According to Ollerus, Imagine Breaker is an accumulation of the hopes of all magicians. He said it's a reference point to return the world to normal after it is twisted by their desires. I don't know if that's its true origin, *but it can be used like that.* You could say this is the other card you could play. It represents the original world. Instead of adding on another layer of paint, you can use this like a palette knife to slowly peel away the previous layers."

The original world and the next world.

If the god's actions were perfect, there might not be any difference between the two.

From a human's perspective, it was possible nothing out of place could be found.

But this Magic God was too perfect.

In which case...

"Even if it is the same result, you couldn't throw away your first and ideal hope of returning to your original world by removing all of the phases you had put in place! Of course you couldn't. The six billion people on Earth truly believe this is the same place as always, but you alone know it has changed. Your second hope of creating a diorama world would be different from the place in your head, so you couldn't throw away the other option!! You could have easily added in a new phase and fled to a new world, but you couldn't give up on your first hope of returning to your original world!! That's why you continued resetting everything and going along with my selfishness even when you could have killed me ten thousand or maybe a hundred million times by now!!"

In that case, this really was a one-on-one battle.

It was a battle allowed for Kamijou Touma and no one else.

Imagine Breaker vs. Gungnir.

The original world vs. the next world.

The battle between those two cards would literally decide the fate of the world.

But there was one thing worth keeping in mind.

Kamijou Touma was undoubtedly standing on this great stage, but he was nothing more than a human. On the stage of the gods, his role was as minor as a tree or the grass during a school arts festival.

“You should be able to do it.”

In other words, this was a fight to see which card Magic God Othinus would choose. Or perhaps it was the ultimate presentation to convince this blonde-haired, green-eyed girl which card she should choose.

“I don’t know how to use this thing. Maybe not even the professional magicians who have completely immersed themselves in this field of magic know. But you should be able to do it. You stand at the peak of magic! You’ve risen to a position with the title of god! You have to have some idea how to repair the world using this reference point!!”

If one thought about it, this was the proper form for a relationship between man and god.

Song.

Dance.

Military exercises.

Prayer.

Entreaty.

Offerings.

Dedications.

Man did not battle gods. Man had negotiated with the gods to overcome crises such as disasters and plagues.

A human could not defeat a god.

But he might be able to slightly alter that god's path to align more closely with what was convenient for mankind.

"Let's try to take even the slightest possible path leading back," spat out Kamijou as he tightly clenched his right fist. "I won't say it's for everyone's sake. I've already rejected all the smiles I saw here and decided to return to my original place even if it means completely separating myself from everyone I know. Even if it takes decades to completely reconcile with them, I've given up on running from the pain. I'm not going to let myself chicken out just because I'm up against a god! I'll do whatever it takes to have you choose my card!!"

"Do you really think I would have done all this if that would work?"

The lance creaked slightly in Othinus's grasp.

Her face showed she had treaded deeply into that territory.

"It didn't work. I tried it and it didn't work!! Even with a palette knife to peel away the paint and even when I peeled it away in extremely thin layers, I wasn't satisfied with the result. There is no longer a convenient path leading back to the way things were. The age can only advance. If what I want is not before my eyes, then my only option is to create the next world!!"

"You must understand, Othinus."

"Understand what? Is a human child going to impudently act as if he knows what a god is thinking? Your tiny head cannot even understand a fraction of the trial and error spent reaching this point, so do not think you can conveniently beat me to the conclusion!!"

"That isn't what I meant." Kamijou slowly shook his head. "It isn't an issue of ability or theory. I'm sure you know what it is I long for. We have both wandered through this exact same black labyrinth! So you must understand!! Returning means losing everything and being hated by everyone, but it also means eventually being able to smile at each other again! You must know just how much you can cast aside for nothing more than that!!"

"..."

It seemed those words were sufficient to silence Othinus.

Even if only for a moment.

Even if only for an instant.

“All that’s left is a test of endurance. Let’s repeat this billions or even trillions of times. I’m returning to the original world. I won’t move on to the next world. The original world I’m talking about might be different from the original world you’re thinking of, but I’m going to force this through regardless. Do you understand, Othinus? *I’m saying I’ll make my dream come true even if it crushes yours!!*”

“Fine, then...”

“So let’s get serious, Othinus. Stop laughing and draw out everything you have as a god. *I won’t save anyone.* I’m fighting for myself. We’re the only two here, so no one can save me but myself!!”

“Ultimately, this is not a fight between you and me. This is a fight for me to make my decision. In which case, I must stop hesitating. I will truly exterminate the fool who is treating my failure as his own accomplishment!!”

Part 6

He stopped counting.

Even the fact that he stopped counting had left his mind.

“...”

Kamijou Touma did not win even once.

He was crushed, sliced, smashed, ripped apart, blown up, and torn to pieces.

That normal high school boy’s flesh was always accurately destroyed. Whenever the light of life in his eyes flickered weakly like a candle’s flame and began to go out, a slight wave would rise in Othinus’s heart.

Give up and move forward.

It is not too late to go back.

She could only make one choice and two options presented themselves to her.

After the slightest hesitation, Othinus would wave her lance and return everything to the beginning before that light completely vanished from the pieces of flesh flying through the air. She returned everything to that black labyrinth she found so detestable.

She did not think about making up her mind just once and bringing it all to an end. Nor did she think about shaking off her hesitation when faced with her sporadic choices.

But...

Othinus gradually gave up. Her feelings were tilting in one direction. She was leading them that way. It did not matter if she was deceiving herself. Self-suggestion was fine. Once she made a sharp turn in the very, very end, she would be stuck on that path no matter how much she regretted it later.

After overcoming the 10,031st slaughter, she received her answer.

She did not even smile.

She would end it here. She would end her dream.

Once the dream was over, only reality would remain. Having cast aside her first hope, she would quickly create the next world and return to a normal everyday life. No one but her understood the value of this battle and it would finally be over. She would have nothing left to do but persuade herself this had been the best option. Otherwise, this unease might return once more.

Most likely, her senses would die.

A blue sky overhead and a green forest around her would no longer move her heart, but in exchange, she could bring an end to the fighting and live a peaceful life.

She had no interest in value or gaining anything.

She fought in search of meaning.

And so...

(It ends here.)

After her many victories, the heat within her had cooled.

The soft portions had been scraped away, so her heart had hardened.

She gradually transformed into something resembling a system.

(My hesitation is vanishing. I can tell that. I can see the path I must travel to simplify my thoughts. Now I can part with this foolish dream and obtain reality in exchange.)

The wavering in her eyes vanished. Her pupils grew fixed. They became something that merely reflected light.

And in exchange, she obtained true victory.

No change had come over Kamijou Touma. Despite all his talk, he had no plan to turn this around. He was only hoping for weakness in Othinus herself.

Once she understood that, Othinus *truly cooled*.

She realized the dream she believed in had been nothing more than that.

And so...

Yet...

An intense headache suddenly surged out from the depths of her head.

“What...?”

Without meaning to, she stopped moving.

After slaughtering him only a few more times, she would have completely given up on her first hope.

An invisible cutting attack shot right by Kamijou Touma and blasted the reinforced concrete school building behind him to pieces.

He did not even turn around to look at it.

He only stared directly at Othinus.

He stared at his enemy.

He stared at that Magic God.

He stared at Othinus’s face as it twisted in pain.

“Finally.”

The word slipped from the corner of the boy’s mouth.

The first attack had missed. Kamijou was not bleeding. Even so, he was not looking very good. That was the cost of being unilaterally slaughtered more times than he could bother counting. If people’s hearts were visible, Kamijou’s would have been torn to pieces.

“It finally...looks like I might win.”

But he still said that while directly facing the blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl.

“Do not...be ridiculous. Are you saying I was stopped because the repeated battles have worn down my mind?”

“I’m not that kind of esper, so I can’t see inside people’s hearts. That means you have to decide for yourself. I’m not the only one on the verge of giving up. I may not look good, but you’re looking even worse.”

Othinus grimaced slightly.

But not due to Kamijou’s words. It was because her head felt like it was about to make a creaking noise.

“Even if I was being worn down, too, our specs are fundamentally different! If we were being exposed to the same pain, your head would be fried first!! So...what is this!?”

“You don’t know the answer? I thought you were a god.”

“Or are you saying you are experiencing the exact same pain yet pretending to be fine. No, that would be impossible. A human could never keep up the deception when faced with enough pain to make a god suffer. If you were feeling this same pain, your head would have changed shape long ago!!”

Hearing that, Kamijou Touma smiled thinly.

He desperately suppressed the core of his body that threatened to make him stagger if he lost focus.

“You’re wrong, Othinus.”

“What?”

“You and I have spent the exact same time in the exact same place. It might seem natural to think we have suffered the exact same damage, but we actually haven’t.”

She did not understand what he was saying.

But she doubted it was complete nonsense. A definite difference in mental damage had shown itself.

“This might be too common a metaphor for a true god, but it’s the same as in a video game, Othinus.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When a weak player challenges an overwhelmingly powerful boss and is defeated, he doesn’t get bored. He can’t win and he’ll complain, but it’s fun to try all sorts of things against a normally unbeatable opponent to analyze their attack pattern. It may leave no data behind, but he feels like he’s accomplishing something. Not only that, but fighting an enemy that’s out of his league feels like it has meaning in and of itself. Saying he ran across a rare boss that no one’s ever seen can make for a decent conversation.”

“…”

“But what about the opposite? If an overwhelmingly powerful player fought extremely weak enemies on and on, he would obviously get bored. His focus wouldn’t last for even half an hour. It would be nothing but work. There’s no room for trial and error and he doesn’t even gain any significant amount of experience points or money. And there’s no meaning in fighting enemies well below his league. Saying he ran across a weak enemy everyone’s seen makes for a terrible conversation.”

They may have stood on the same stage, but their roles were completely different.

The weak one saw meaning in his reckless challenge. The strong one was sick of going along with it.

Ultimately, there was no clear standard for how much one’s mind was worn down.

It was all reliant on the state of one’s heart.

“We repeated this countless times. We shared the exact same events. We walked through this hellish labyrinth together. ...But it was still different. We weren’t the same. *We were worn down at completely different speeds!!* And that difference overcame the difference in specs and caught up to you first! We can’t repeat this again, Othinus. If I can’t stop you here, you’ll crumble from the inside!!”

It was an invisible knife.

Kamijou Touma had been unable to swing his fist at Othinus even once, but he had succeeded in finding a weapon that could easily provide a fatal wound. He had found the material he needed for his negotiations with the Magic God.

“Fine, then.” Her voice was low, like a growling beast. “*I will give up here.*”

“…”

“I will cast aside my first hope of the original world and resign myself to my second hope of the next world. If I cannot put it off any longer, I will give up on your life here. This is indeed a good opportunity. You know what this means, don’t you?”

Her tone of voice showed there was one thing she could not accept above all.

But it was not the headache throbbing deep in her head.

And it was not the vague state of her heart.

It was that the human before her thought he stood above her.

“I will not return. I will not repeat. I will not be trapped by my hesitation. I will give up on everything and proceed forward. ...Once I kill you this time, there is no next time, human. You cannot win. You have not won even once. The next attack will take your life!!”

Othinus did not even need to move from that spot.

She only had to lightly raise the lance.

An invisible explosion would immediately smash Kamijou Touma’s body to pieces.

She had made this same attack countless times before. She had done it so many times that she could not distinguish her memories of doing it in the past from her vision of it happening in the future. The result was already known. The ideal destruction in her mind was nothing more than following the past, so there was no chance of failure. The actual results from the thousands or tens of thousands of previous times ensured the current result.

Yet...

In the next instant, Kamijou accurately evaded the invisible explosion by leaping to the side.

Part 7

(Dh...!!)

The intense pain striking Kamijou Touma’s entire body caused him to grimace.

He had somehow escaped the lethal area, but the explosion still hit him in midair.

He struck the dirt ground after being thrown further than his expected landing point. His excess momentum sent him rolling even further.

Even so, he endured.

“...”

Othinus turned her one eye toward her target and held up the lance once more.

A gapless wall of explosions was sent toward Kamijou Touma. There were so many explosions that they seemed to blend into each other.

He did not hold up his right hand.

Instead, he turned his body to the side as if weaving his way through a crowded train and stepped slightly forward.

That was all.

The puny boy's body slipped skillfully through the wall of thousands or tens of thousands of explosions.

"What?"

The result and Othinus's theory did not match, so she spoke aloud with a puzzled expression.

"What happened!? You should not be able to keep up with me with your specs!!"

"No, I can't. And these repeated battles haven't increased my physical strength. Nor have I unlocked a hidden power in Imagine Breaker or anything like that. I'm still me. I haven't become anything else."

"Then...!!"

The twinkling of the stars in the sky was an ominous ill omen.

Each and every one of them transformed into a sharp spear of light and poured down like rain.

However...

"Then how can you survive!?"

"Have you forgotten, Othinus? Or was it such a lame metaphor that you ignored it? *It's fun to try all sorts of things against a normally unbeatable opponent to analyze their attack pattern. It may leave no data behind, but it feels like you're accomplishing something*!!"

"You can't mean..."

"Even if I can't level up like in an RPG and even if there's no change to my physical strength or supernatural ability, I've been analyzing you all this time. While you killed me again and again, I gradually memorized your combat patterns!! I don't even have to think about it anymore. I can move on instinct!! I had plenty of chances to do this. After all, you stuck with me until I stopped counting altogether!!"

This was similar to retro shooting games. The path to the next level was more dependent on the real-life player improving his skills than on the in-game ship's parameters increasing.

On a difficulty setting that looked monstrous at first glance, it may seem impossible to beat. But after playing enough times, one began to notice specific traits to the movements and barrage of enemy bullets. After building up footholds bit by bit, the player could defeat the boss with almost automated movements and advance to the next stage.

"You mean you used all those deaths?"

"Unfortunately, I truly could not defeat you. I wasn't holding back. I gave it everything I had and was still killed in the end. But I wasn't being killed for no reason. I purposefully chose *how* I was killed to test out all sorts of things. *In death, I learned*. It may be different for pure gods, but this is how lowly human entertainment works."

There may not have been meaning to it.

He may not have gained anything other than a sense of satisfaction.

But...

"I'm the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere. My right hand may contain a bit of a special power, but that isn't enough to call me an expert. Even if I managed to evade a god's attack here, I'm still me. If I fought a normal magician, I'd normally lose. My specs aren't any higher than that."

Even as Kamijou spoke, a whirl of explosions pursued him.

But the destruction could not catch up.

He would slip through even the slightest gap or he would betray Othinus's expectations of where he would move next. In one way or another, he would just barely prevent his body from exploding.

"But I've put together your pattern. Even if I would normally lose to another magician, I can slip through the cracks against you!! You claim to have the power of a god, but you're a Magic God who rose up from the position of a human. This may be rude to you as a god, but you're somehow easy to get along with. You have desires which lead to hostility. As long as I can systematically find the clues to understanding those desires, you aren't that difficult to deal with!!"

Kamijou Touma was not an expert on the type of magic common on the other side of the planet.

But without knowing it, he had pointed out a common characteristic of polytheistic gods such as the Greek and Norse gods.

Polytheistic gods had emotions. And those emotions were not limited to positive ones like love or justice. They also displayed the negative side, such as fear and jealousy.

When the opinions of all the many gods were gathered, it created a single flexible system. As long as that system ultimately led them down the right path, everything was fine.

Those existences were known as gods, but they still had doubts and failures like anyone else.

And so...

“Most likely, you aren’t absolute.”

The gods reached the perfect answer when combined in a single group.

By complementing each other’s weaknesses, they created a sturdy defense system that could not be overcome by any foe.

That was one characteristic of polytheistic mythologies.

If only the central pillar of those gods manifested herself without the world of heaven or the other gods, nothing said she could wield perfect power.

“Even if you have perfected yourself as ‘Othinus’, that doesn’t mean you’re absolute!!”

“...”

He was making guess after guess.

No one had taught him any of this. He had never read any books on the topic. This rough answer had simply soaked into his mind after everything he had experienced. But that method gave Othinus a greater quiet sense of danger than if he had diligently educated himself on the subject.

Her reaction was not surprising.

This was not contained to superficial knowledge. This had soaked in to the point that he expressed it with his actions. It had reached the level of usable skill.

And Norse mythology was a giant system built around battle.

Othinus stood at the top of that system, so it was only natural for her to focus more on filthy experience grasped through combat than on clean theories drawn up at a desk.

It made no difference if that experience was on the enemy’s side.

“I see.”

The lance audibly sliced through the air as she lightly swung it.

That was not a sign of an attack.

She slowly moved the lance to hold it in both hands.

“I had grown sick of my unfortunate connection to Ollerus, but I had thought that was the limit of opposition this world would present.”

“...?”

“However, I suppose the time I have spent with you has surpassed that connection. To think this place would create someone who understands me even more than him. The world seems to enjoy throwing difficulties my way!!”

Her shout acted as a trigger.

Kamijou Touma and Othinus both moved at once.

It ended after one step.

A whirl of destruction burst out.

Time stopped.

Space was compressed.

The standard concepts of time and space no longer had any meaning.

The lance of the head Norse god was named Gungnir. Its handle was made from the wood of an ash tree, the same as the world tree, its sharp tip was made from gold, and it had tremendous power due to the runes personally carved into the Dvergr-made base by the head god.

It had a few different characteristics.

1. The lance was made to be thrown.

2. The lance would always hit its target once thrown.

3. The lance could not be shot down or destroyed mid-flight.

4. The lance would always return to its owner’s hands after piercing the target.

Returning to its owner seemed to be a relatively important ability for projectiles. For example, Cú Chulainn from Celtic mythology's spear did not possess that ability and he was ultimately killed when his own spear was thrown back at him. Lightning God Thor's Mjölnir in Norse mythology and Light God Lugh's Fragarach in Celtic mythology were both said to have this ability.

It was possible those weapons' characteristics were meant to make them "wonderful weapons only the special gods were allowed to use and that no human could ever make".

And even with all of those characteristics, the lance of the head Norse god had yet another characteristic that put it a clear step above the weapons' of the other gods.

5. That lance would destroy the symbols of human power.

That came from when Gungnir had broken the legendary sword wielded by the father of Sigurd the hero. When necessary, the head Norse god would take power from humans, implying it was their time to die, and add their soul to the army of the gods.

A human could not defeat a god.

The convenience of the god had priority over everything in the human's world and the workings of the world would act accordingly.

No other characteristic felt more strongly like the power of a god.

Rather than showing simple destructive power by blowing away a mountain or vaporizing the sea, it bluntly indicated the precedence of the god.

In other words, the instant that lance left Othinus's hands, the world would be blown to pieces.

Time returned to normal.

Kamijou once more felt space spread out around him.

As the lance was fired with tremendous force, the "happy world" was smashed to pieces as if space itself was being torn apart. As a fragment of the world approached with the force of a raging wave, it took on the shape of a giant lance. The walls of all the phases were crushed, transformed into a swirl of deadly weapons resembling sharp shards of glass, and approached their pitiful target as if to swallow him whole.

Everything was ripped up.

The black labyrinth, which had used up all of its possibilities, showed itself.

Magic God Othinus had the ability to create, so she was technically not destroying anything. This may have been a change brought about by adding a new phase into the world. Nevertheless, it was blatantly obvious what the scene before Kamijou's eyes would produce. It was the same as referring to the utter destruction of a luxurious palace as "creating a pile of rubble". This was undeniably a torrent of destruction.

The convenience of the world of man meant nothing.

The destruction carried out by the god took precedence.

Its greatest effect was causing any resisting human who saw it to give up.

It provided such an overwhelming feeling of resignation that even an experienced hero would fall to his knees and end his challenge.

Most likely, no one could have escaped that lance when attacked head on. No matter what form of defense or evasion they attempted, they would have had no hope of surviving. That attack had been given the parameter of "no human can oppose it". Unless one left the territory of man, one would be smashed to pieces. Not even Fiamma of the Right or Ollerus could have done anything when faced with it.

There was no way a normal high school boy could overcome it.

Even with a special power in his right hand, he would be smashed to pieces before he could use it.

However...

(Weren't you listening, Othinus?)

Kamijou Touma thought to himself as he silently stared at the tip of the giant lance created by sacrificing an entire world.

(I'm not a special person, I might normally lose to a professional magician, and I'm nothing more than a high school student.)

In the instant of firing the lance, Othinus's face twisted slightly.

She must have seen the look on the boy's face.

Yes.

Kamijou Touma was smiling ever so slightly.

"But right now, I can overcome you!!!!"

The action he took was simple.

He tightly clenched his right fist and used his entire body weight to thrust it forward.

No one would have been able to keep up with its overwhelming speed. Their bodies would have been smashed to pieces before they could even hope to follow the tip of the lance with their eyes.

But the experience he had built up accurately guided his movements.

He had achieved a surefire attack that would work on Magic God Othinus and no one else.

Kamijou Touma's right fist was sucked in toward the one point that no one else would have been able to reach.

His fist reached the sharp tip of Gungnir.

In that instant, all sound vanished from the world.

The kind world vanished and everything was dyed in black.

When Kamijou Touma's right fist struck it, the lance veered sharply upward.

When Othinus held up her hand, the lance rotated complexly and began to fly back to her hand through the black sky.

But it never completed the action.

The lance broke apart in midair and completely disintegrated before returning to Othinus like a boomerang.

"..."

Kamijou's fist did not escape unscathed.

The middle and ring finger of his supposedly tightly clenched fist had been twisted at a distinctly odd angle.

Even so, the boy smiled.

As battered as he was, he smiled.

"It's...over..." He could feel that this was the case. "I...ended it... You can't...escape my dream..."

Othinus could not return the situation to the beginning.

The damage to her mind was approaching its limit. If she repeated the battle any more, she would be destroyed from the inside. And the more she repeated the battle, the more experience Kamijou would accumulate. If she let him challenge her again, she would only be defeated by a gradually more skilled Kamijou. Just like the player of a shooting game, his level of experience determined how great an obstacle was.

That was why she could not escape.

She could only view the simple reality that she had lost.

“Do you...”

Othinus muttered in a daze.

The sound of small cracks entering something could be heard.

“Do you really think that is all it takes to end this?”

The sound was likely coming from behind the eyepatch she wore.

Even while looking on from the outside, Kamijou could tell something was pulsating inside.

“Gungnir did nothing more than point my powers in the direction of 100% success. But the fairy spell Ollerus used on me at the very end gave me another possibility as a Magic God: 100% failure. That possibility means all of my actions will backfire. But if I know I will always fail, I can achieve victory by always choosing the exact opposite of my initial impression. ...Even without the lance, a Magic God is still a Magic God!! This is not even remotely over!!!!!!”

“Perhaps not...”

Kamijou felt something like a chill run along his back.

He could feel something gathering in his broken right fist.

The destruction or severing of that fist seemed to act as some sort of trigger. He could feel in his skin that something was about to burst out.

“But I will most likely defeat you.”

“...!!”

This was different from his earlier baseless confidence.

In his interception and destruction of the lance, Kamijou Touma had overturned a myth.

“Even if I’d lose to someone else, I *will* defeat you. Our specs no longer matter, Othinus. My experience has surpassed a certain point. Even if I was blindfolded and I held the controller behind my back, I could try for a no miss clear.”

“.....Fine then,” muttered Othinus quietly.

An instant later, the sound of shattering glass filled the area.

A spear of light seemed to stab through her back and into the center of her chest.

Kamijou did not know the details. He did not know this was the secret fairy spell that Ollerus and Fiamma of the Right had worked together to attack her with.

He did not know how the Magic God had used it to give her the negative possibilities of her power.

“You have only risen so high due to my failure as a god. In that case, I will correct that failure here. It is time you learned your place and prostrated yourself in the depths of the earth, human!!”

Cracks of light spread from the center of her chest and out to her entire body.

And it did not remain contained within her body.

After the lance’s attack had blown everything away, only the black world remained. The cracks spreading from Othinus’s back ate into that entire world. A strange symbol spread out seemingly endlessly. It resembled neither wings nor a flower.

Did her power extend to the farthest reaches of the world?

Was the world ultimately a part of her?

Gungnir had brought about a positive territory. The opposite position was a negative territory. Even as Kamijou Touma viewed that other possibility for a Magic God, he smiled and clenched his right fist.

And he spoke once more.

“Yeah, this is fine by me.”

“...What?”

“What you bear isn’t so light that I can convince you with words. *I can understand that now*. So let’s not hold back. I don’t care if it’s hopeless or hellish. It wouldn’t be any fun if we don’t squeeze out every last drop.”

That acted as the trigger.

In fact, the boy had likely understood his words would enrage the Magic God.

And Othinus responded.

She was so angry that he heard the sound of her canine tooth biting into the edge of her lip.

As she tasted blood, the Magic God took action.

Othinus, or the head Norse god which became the origin of the name, had left behind many different legends as the center of the system making up a mythology. That god did not necessarily use only one weapon and there were records of that god defeating various different enemies with various different blades.

And there was one weapon specifically associated with Othinus rather than Odin.

It was simply known as a crossbow.

No one knew its official name, much less how it was produced. That phantom weapon had left only a description of its frightening destructive power in the texts. That symbol of the head god was too obscure to be called a legend and had mostly been covered by the mists of time.

It was said that crossbow could simultaneously hold ten arrows in a fan shape.

It was said firing that crossbow could exterminate any army.

The entire world could be heard creaking.

Kamijou looked up slightly.

He saw the disturbing symbol bursting from Othinus’s back and providing the color of light to the entire black world it covered. He heard the creaking sound of it gathering tremendous power.

In the end, the world was her crossbow.

As soon as Kamijou Touma realized that, ten pieces of destruction rained down from the heavenly dome above.

Part 8

What exactly could this be compared to?

Perhaps a super-long railgun that targeted someone on the planet's surface after eternal acceleration using straight guiderails stretching from one end of the universe to the other.

Perhaps a singularity weapon that created destruction unexplainable with Newtonian physics by directly messing with the smallest particles dealing with mass and motion such as the bosons and the Higgs particle.

In all likelihood, expressing it with words was meaningless.

Even if one gathered everything that could be expressed with words, it was unlikely one could shoot down that crossbow.

It merely hit.

"...!!!???"

Kamijou Touma leaped to the side with all his strength.

...The first shot fell vertically from the heavens.

It held the destructive power needed to easily wipe out a planet or two, but it was beyond the point of creating anything like a crater. This was no different from a rifle bullet fired with the initial velocity of a sniper rifle piercing glass without breaking it. The arrow had been fired with such great speed that it pierced the pitch black ground without waiting for the impact to propagate.

Even so, Kamijou ran.

His distance to Othinus was close yet far. It felt like an infinite wall.

...The second shot seemed to skim the ground as it was fired behind him and diagonally to the left.

Kamijou crouched down and the arrow passed over his head and swept across the world. Its trajectory was angled downward slightly and it created a giant valley in that black-dyed world.

Othinus did not move from her spot.

She and Kamijou had to be the same. They were both pouring all their strength into defeating their opponent.

...The third and fourth shots burst up through the ground.

They stabbed up a few meters away on either side of Kamijou. It was a trap. If he rashly moved even a step to evade, he would be smashed to pieces.

The more unnecessary actions he took, the farther he would be from victory.

He sharpened his senses like a needle and pictured himself stretching forward and piercing Othinus with that needle.

...The fifth shot came from directly in front of him.

His movements to the left and right were already sealed off and now Othinus had thrown a straight pitch. For the first time, Kamijou swung his right hand. But not in a straight impact meant to destroy. He scooped his hand up from below, traced his hand along the surface of the arrow, and diverted its trajectory upwards.

He ran straight forward.

His fear and self-interest threatened to shake that simple action.

...The sixth and seventh shots scraped across Othinus's shoulders.

The two arrows were fired from behind her and they collided in midair before reaching him. With a tremendous explosive noise, the two arrows' trajectories changed complexly. The boy evaded one by ducking his upper body down and then jumped over the other with a great leap.

Devoting himself to evasion was meaningless.

His path threatened to waver, but he used the power of his will to desperately keep himself on course.

...The eighth shot overcame the restrictions of the third dimension.

Kamijou felt a static electricity-like spark on his spine and immediately swung his head to the side as hard as he could. An instant later, space suddenly split open and an arrow assaulted the world.

He focused on his trajectory.

The several meter path to Othinus appeared clearly in his head.

...The ninth shot ignored the concept of numbers.

The arrows that fell from above colored the night sky like fireworks and glittered like stars covering the heavens. Every single one of them was fatal, but Kamijou did not freeze up. No matter how torrentially they rained down, there was always a safe space left to step in.

He was going to reach her.

He glared at Othinus's face and clenched his right fist tighter than before.

...And the tenth shot...

(I can reach her.)

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

He sharply moved right up to her.

(I'll reach her no matter what!! It doesn't matter where the final arrow comes from! I can punch her after evading it or punch her before she can fire the arrow. Either way, I'll end this here!!)

"Othinus!!"

In the instant he shouted out, he was certain of his victory.

He stopped thinking about the tenth shot altogether. That was why he had reached the idea of ending this before she could fire it.

But his mistake was understandable.

The final shot approached from directly behind Magic God Othinus.

And she did not move a single step.

In other words, the arrow unhesitatingly pierced through Othinus.

The final arrow broke through the girl's entire body and assaulted Kamijou from the blind spot directly in front of him.

"...Ah."

Time stopped.

He was too slow to react.

By the time he heard a dull sound, the final arrow had already been absorbed into his chest and accurately targeted his heart.

This was nothing as kind as piercing or breaking him.

In the instant of impact, Kamijou Touma's body was smashed to pieces from the chest down. As his heart continued to writhe in midair, the tip of the arrow caught it and blasted it to the farthest reaches of that world.

All that remained in that place were the boy's arms, shoulders, and head.

At that level, this could only be called his remains.

Kamijou's "body" spun at least twice through the air and Othinus caught it in one hand.

She had supposedly taken the exact same damage, but not so much as a single scratch remained on her smooth skin. The destruction had indeed occurred, but the wounds had immediately repaired themselves like watching the destruction of gelatin in reverse.

Othinus spoke with a cold light in her one eye.

"It is over."

"...Dammit. Maybe so."

Kamijou had lost again and again and used those losses to analyze Othinus's combat patterns. That was why he could battle this Magic God. However, that had only been Othinus when wielding her lance. That had been Othinus with her positive possibilities. He had not been able to accurately pursue her actions once she opened up the negative possibilities using the fairy spell. That was why he had made a mistake at the very, very end.

He no longer felt any pain. His organs had been destroyed and even his heart had been taken. It was strange that he was even conscious. He had heard cruel rumors of criminals' heads blinking after being decapitated by a guillotine or people complaining to witnesses after being torn to pieces when hit by a train. However, he had never imagined he would one day test it out himself.

This was simply a mistake until the blood left his head.

It was a slight illusion until death caught up to him.

"Either way, I may never have had any chance of winning."

"It is a bit late to realize that."

"*Without your help, the victory I had decided on would always have been out of reach.*"

"..."

Yes.

Kamijou Touma's goal was not to take revenge on her for taking his world from him. Nor was it beat up Othinus and prove he was stronger than a Magic God.

If he had killed her, he would have gained nothing.

That would have left him with a bleak future of loneliness in that pitch-black world.

Imagine Breaker was a reference point for the world, so it could restore everything.

But he could not open the door to the world in his dreams.

Othinus narrowed her eye slightly.

"If you knew that, why did you challenge me?"

"I thought I could reach you." The boy sluggishly moved his lips while held in her arm. "I had no clue whatsoever, so a deadly fight was the only option left. But...just running around wouldn't have solved anything. I wanted my words to reach you and to set something in motion, and I thought my only option was to stand before you despite the danger."

"But nothing is left for you now. You have simply lost. The world you wish for will never arrive again."

"...That's fine."

Kamijou was not even blinking anymore.

He seemed to be gradually losing the strength he needed to form expressions.

"That was my personal selfish desire. Its failure won't make anyone but me sad. ...So that's fine. The world hasn't failed. No one knows about this loss. This place has no crime, debt, or broken hearts. The people I wanted to protect won't shed any tears."

In the end, what had this boy truly wanted?

Most likely, not even Kamijou Touma knew that.

He had been cornered by ridiculous situations, the entire world had acted as if he had betrayed them, and he had even had his existence fade into the background. He had pushed down the option that held only peace and smiles and he had longed for his original world despite knowing it was wrong.

Had he truly wanted to destroy it?

Had he truly wanted to protect it?

It would have been strange if he had been able to think calmly about it. Only a coldhearted person who viewed the world with cold eyes could have done that. It was because he cared so much for it all that he had wanted to protect it, been unable to allow it, wanted to take it back, wanted to watch it go, wanted to give up on it, and wanted to make it his once more.

It had all been contradictory and the puny head of a human could no longer find an answer.

His thoughts had been such a mess that he had only been able to escape into the action of fighting.

He may have wanted someone to give him the answer.

That answer could have been to save the entire world.

That answer could have been to bring about his own death.

"...Can I ask for one thing?"

"I have no reason to grant your wish."

"You're pretty intolerant for a god," said Kamijou with his sluggish lips.

Othinus expected him to ask for the happiness of the residents of the world he loved.

But she was wrong.

This is what he said:

"*Make good use of this.*"

"...?"

"My right hand. I was only able to use it for fights, but you must know a better way to use it. You can use it as the reference point for the world that Ollerus mentioned."

"I already told you I have no reason to grant your wish. The battle is over and you will soon die. No one will praise you if I create a selfish miniature world for you, so there is no meaning."

"That isn't what I meant." Kamijou slowly shook his head while Othinus still held him. "The battle is over, so it's fine. Use this and take back your world. Take back your first hope."

"..."

“Do you think that isn’t necessary because you can create an identical world from the ground up? You think it’s the same as returning to your original world because no one can tell the difference? ...That’s wrong, Othinus. Even if no one else knows and the world is filled with smiles, it will be nothing but a tragedy as long as *you* know the difference.”

He spoke as if he knew what he was talking about.

That great criminal had continued with his own selfishness even after weighing the happiness of all mankind against his own life. That was why he was able to say this.

Othinus had presented her first and second hopes. Would she return to her original world or create the next world? Even if the result was the same, the process was different. It was a natural diamond versus an artificial diamond. That tiny difference would constantly give her the same sense of alienation that Kamijou Touma had felt when left out of that world filled with peace and smiles.

Othinus was the victor of the era.

And unlike Kamijou, her selfishness would bring happiness to a later era. Even if that era was created from her own arbitrary judgment and actions, the actual result lay before the boy’s eyes: a god. He could see her acting in a perfect enough way to be named as such.

Once he accepted death, swept away all his regrets, and carefully observed her once more, he could tell.

If he left everything to her, the world would continue on just fine.

Before long, he would die. His selfishness would vanish from the world.

So...

“I have a challenge for you, Othinus.”

The loser spoke quietly.

Strangely, their positions were reminiscent of Mímir granting wisdom to the head Norse god. Even after he was beheaded due to the schemes of the gods and giants, Mímir continued giving advice to the head god like a friend.

Over eighty percent of this body had been blown away and he had even lost his heart, but the boy’s right arm slowly moved like a broken clockwork toy. He stretched that arm toward Othinus who still held what remained of his body.

It looked like he was trying to stroke her cheek.

Or perhaps, despite being the loser, he was using his thumb to wipe away a child’s tears.

And yet the cold-hearted victor should not have had any tears to wipe away.

There should have been nothing but filthy blood stains.

“Be selfish if you wish. Forget about good and evil. It doesn’t matter what your reasons are. Maybe something irritates you or maybe something is an eyesore. Just act the way you want. You’ve already shown me that doing that will lead to everyone smiling. So do as you wish. ...What is it you wanted to do in the very beginning? Unless you make that come true, you will become what I was: a pathetic lost child crushed by the happy world.”

That was all.

Kamijou Touma’s arm hung down and his eyelids stopped moving.

“...”

Magic God Othinus stood alone in the pitch black world.

The boy she held in her slender arm did not speak any longer. He may have had some blood left in his head, but he did not have enough strength left to think. He had lost most of his organs, including his heart, so it was right to classify him as dead. A few cells might have still been functioning, but the boy had been lost. That was the truth.

Before long, Imagine Breaker’s power would transfer into something else.

It could be a person or an object. If she removed all matter from the world, that power might pour into Othinus herself. It was no different from playing old maid against an opponent who only had one card. Even if you knew that card was the joker, you had to take it.

She had won.

She had buried her final enemy.

No one remained to get in her way.

However...

“Oh,” muttered Othinus in that lonely world.

If she wanted a lively world, she could snap her fingers and create a world of peace and smiles, yet she stood all alone.

This was the deepest part of the hell Kamijou Touma had feared most.

In exchange for his own defeat, he had reminded Othinus where she stood.

She had no interest in what she could create.

She had to return to her original world no matter what.

But what had made her think that way?

Where had she hidden what it was she had originally wanted to do?

For example, there was the time she had wished for something that did not change as she stood before the collection of scratches that had vanished in a night.

For example, there was the time she had thought about justice and peace in a world of nothing but unpleasant smiles.

For example, there was the time she had achieved that clear confrontation between the only two people in a twisted world.

Returning to her original world had been a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. Why had she wanted to return? What had she thought she would achieve with this victory? As she thought, the answer revealed itself.

This was a path someone had once walked down.

That was why that boy had been able to speak as if he knew what he was talking about.

When she thought about it, it seemed obvious.

It had been Othinus herself who had created that hell.

“Did I want him to understand?” She spoke slowly as if exhaling. “Did I want someone who understands me?”

This was unlike her relationship with Ollerus. He had held the same type of power but had only been an enemy.

This was unlike her relationship with Gremlin. They had merely had similar goals and had been bound by fear.

She had no interest in a smiling group that joined together in fear of her great power like the international coalition.

In this world that was ever-so-slightly off, she had wanted someone who would understand these wounds of alienation and help soothe them.

She had found no such person in the changed world, so she had hoped for such a person in her original world.

She had wanted to return there no matter what. It was the same as a lost traveler in the distant land of a foreign tongue wanting to return to her homeland. She had believed that she would find warmth there once she arrived.

But...

“Was there anything like that there?”

Othinus tried to recall that distant era.

It may have been due to the thick wall of time that she was having difficulty. Or perhaps it was because she would have to remember pain to reach the answer.

Wherever she had gone, she had been a feared tyrant who constantly spread death and violence.

Even in the endlessly glorified history books written by the winners, she had been so horrible that she was known as a god of war and other similar titles.

So...

“Was there really someone who would conveniently understand me in my original world?”

She had no answer to that question.

The boy she held had already ceased to function.

And yet that may have been what she had wanted to obtain even if it meant destroying the current world.

She had travelled an eternal journey for the possibility of obtaining it, but she had destroyed it with her own hands.

That was why she was alone.

It had been unavoidable.

That boy had not had any detailed plan or chance of winning.

But it had definitely been that boy who had provided her with this sense of loss.

To put it in other words...

“That was...a truly cruel attack.”

She held the reference point of a right hand needed to repair the world. She possessed the power and knowledge of a Magic God needed to use it effectively.

She only had to wave her hand.

The odds of success had lowered to 50/50, but she still had the right to take the challenge.

However, while they both used the term “original world”, the one in Kamijou Touma’s mind and the one in Othinus’s mind were slightly different.

Even if the difference was so slight that no one in the world would notice, it tormented her horribly.

She had to make up her mind.

Which world would she use this single chance on?

Her own world?

Or Kamijou Touma’s world?

She could only choose one.

The boy’s words replayed in the back of her mind.

He had said the following:

What is it you wanted to do in the very beginning?

That settled it for her.

Returning to her original world had only been a means to an end.

What if she could not find it even if she searched through every nook and cranny of the original world she had been born and raised in?

What if it did exist in the original world a certain boy had been born and raised in?

Her options had narrowed down to one.

EPLIOGUE

Will You Accept It, or Not?

Continue.

"...Ah!?"

Kamijou awoke.

As he was standing on his feet, it may have been odd to say he had been asleep. He was unsure if a human could pass out on their feet, but that must have been what had happened as he had just woken up.

He was not in the pitch black darkness or the happy world. He was on a single giant island created from countless wrecked ships piled on top of each other.

This was Sargasso.

Once he recalled that name, Kamijou's consciousness rapidly focused on reality.

(What is this place? Is this a paradise created for Othinus's convenience? No, something isn't right. Wait! Don't tell me...!!)

It was enough of a shock for his heart to beat oddly.

(Did she return me? Did she rewind it all? But why!? This world where I was born should be a little bit different from her world!!)

He looked around in surprise and saw a few familiar faces: Index holding the calico cat, Misaka Mikoto, Lessar, and Leivinia Birdway. A black JSDF rubber boat was moored at the water's edge.

Something other than the joy of this reunion caught at the edge of his mind.

It was too soon to relax. Some major trick remained. That warning came from the instincts at the source of his heart rather than from his reason.

And then he saw it.

“Othinus...?”

The blonde-haired, eyepatch-wearing girl stood at the edge of the cliff created by a broken ship. When he compared their positions, he finally realized what was happening.

She did not hold the lance.

But otherwise, the situation resembled...

(Just before the world was destroyed? But Othinus became the victor of the era. She didn’t need to return to this point. The only reason I can think of is to...*concede the world to me!*)

Kamijou could not have returned here on his own.

Magic God Othinus’s cooperation would have been essential.

He did not know how much his words had gotten through to her. He could not guess what kind of change had come over her heart.

But there was something different about Othinus even as she gave an arrogant and evil smile.

She had not brought only herself back. The lack of the lance that symbolized her power proved that.

For an instant, he was unsure what to say to her.

She had been the one to initially create the situation, but she had also been the one to end it and return Kamijou here. If his guess was correct, she had abandoned her objective for this. So should he thank her?

As he thought about that, Index began speaking by his side.

She glared directly at Othinus.

“You’re Othinus, aren’t you!? You brought chaos to Tokyo and caused trouble for everyone!! We won’t let you do what you want anymore!!”

Kamijou truly stopped breathing for an instant.

That threatening aura and hostile tone of voice were not like Index’s normal self.

Yet no one found it odd.

Next, Mikoto, Lessar, and Birdway spoke.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but you got my mama involved in this! Sorry, but I’m not going to hold back!!”

“Well, let’s just get this over with. Just because we’re on the magic side doesn’t mean we want to be at war with the science side at all times. To be honest, the chaos Gremlin is causing is quite a nuisance.”

“You’re a bit too twisted for one of my research subjects. To be blunt, you’re not to my taste. People like you need to be crushed right away. Otherwise, you’ll go hide somewhere and cause problems later.”

Until that moment, Kamijou Touma had not truly understood just what it meant for Othinus to go along with his selfishness.

Returning Kamijou to his original world meant bringing Othinus there as well.

“You’re...kidding...” he muttered in a daze.

He could not keep up with the flow of time. His mind could not catch up to this scene that was best described as a “final battle”.

Othinus had conceded the world to him.

She had conceded everything to him.

She had wanted to return to her original home even if it meant making an enemy of this entire world and using the members of her own group of Gremlin. But she had cast aside the sole method of returning there in order to save Kamijou who had been wandering through another world just like her. He did not know what change of heart had led to that, but the result told him everything he needed to know. After everything had ended, something had to have happened.

Something had sprouted within her and now he had to fight her again?

He had to join together with all the other allies of justice and drive her away in the name of peace?

“No... No! Wait! That isn’t the case anymore!! So...!!”

Kamijou’s words did not reach those around him.

For one thing, he could not explain it properly.

He had no proof.

The world had ended, but it was back to normal now.

And in between, something had happened to reach some sort of conclusion between him and Othinus.

There was nothing he could use to rationally and objectively prove it.

The threatening noise of sparks burst from Misaka Mikoto's bangs. Lessar and Birdway held up their respective spiritual items and muttered enchantments. Violent lightning and crimson flames swirled together and flew straight toward Othinus. Index sang an eerie song to prevent her from using defensive spells.

Kamijou could only watch.

He thought he saw Othinus smile slightly as the destruction reached her.

And a mere instant later, he heard a disturbing bursting noise and her small form flew through the air.

She made no attempt to defend or evade.

Kamijou's lips trembled. He clearly felt they had done something horrible.

To him, that tiny scene looked like a delicate girl being cruelly beat down by overwhelming violence.

"What the hell...?"

Othinus was knocked backwards. She had been standing on the cliff-like edge of a giant broken ship, so her small form completely disappeared from Kamijou's vision.

What had happened to her?

What was going on!?

"What the hell is this!? Othinus, you knew this would happen, didn't you!? You knew this would happen if you saved me!!"

"Eh? Ah? ...Touma!?"

"Wait a second! What's wrong with you!?"

The next thing Kamijou knew, he was running.

The voices of his allies did not even reach his mind.

As he ran desperately across that ground made of countless wrecked ships, he cursed his own foolishness. When he thought about it, it was obvious. In his original world, Othinus had been the leader of Gremlin, the group which was threatening the world. The international coalition had been on the verge of attacking her. He should have been able to predict what kind of world she would find herself in if she gave him his wish and returned here.

If she had wanted to, Othinus could have opposed the entire world.

Not only that, but she might have won. It did not matter if she had the lance or not.

But she had changed.

Kamijou Touma could not determine which of his words had affected her so greatly, but she had changed. Most likely, she no longer intended to fight and had no intention of destroying this world. Kamijou had made that the case. He had broken her fangs and then sent her back to the battlefield.

“Othinus! Where are you, Othinus!?”

He searched everywhere.

There had been hints everywhere. There had been those countless cruel worlds that had been made to tempt him or mentally corner him. He had been pursued by the international coalition, he had seen someone else take his place, he had seen a world filled with smiles and peace that only needed him to disappear, and he had seen so many other types of despair and forms of hell that he had stopped counting.

But had Othinus truly created those on a whim?

What if she had modeled them after something?

For example, *what if they were all based on the painful memories Othinus herself had experienced*.

If that was the case...

“Dammit,” muttered Kamijou while almost in tears. His voice quickly grew to a shout. “When I said I couldn’t stand that place any longer and decided to flee that nightmare world, was I forcing that same nightmare onto you!? Are you experiencing the same world that made me give up!?”

He heard static.

Something hung from a cord caught on the edge of an old boat.

A female announcer's voice came from that cheap emergency radio. He felt as if he had seen this in that nightmare world. Or perhaps this was the original scene.

"It seems a means of resolving the chaos in Tokyo has been found. We have information saying the coalition military is beginning an attack on the headquarters of the criminal organization behind it. ...What are those? Missiles? No, there are far too many of them. I can see something that looks like shooting stars moving toward the center of Tokyo Bay!!"

"..."

Kamijou slowly raised his head.

And there he saw...

♦

Othinus lay on her back.

In her blurry vision, the sky was filled with countless lights.

"The Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Heh... To think they would start getting along now."

This was what she deserved. This was her punishment.

She understood that.

To achieve her goal, she had used far too many things. She had angered organizations around the world, driven fear into normal people who knew nothing of magic, and even trampled her helpers in Gremlin underfoot. Once Gremlin knew of her personal objective, they would likely rebel. They would say they had not risked their lives for such a petty thing.

No matter what happened, she had no future.

She had known that from the moment she had returned here.

She could win if she wanted to. She had intended to destroy this world from the beginning. But Othinus knew of no way to win while preserving this world. And if she could not do that, returning would lose all meaning. All that was left for her was to be attacked by everyone around her.

She had wings to fly through the air, but she would be slowly devoured by the ants on the ground.

The pain would likely last a long time.

That was the price she would pay for briefly obtaining someone who understood her.

Othinus had made her decision because obtaining that for even an instant had outweighed the next world she would have created.

“Honestly,” muttered Othinus as she lay on the ground and stared up at all the twinkling stars overhead. “You cannot kill a god with that, humans. I knew this would happen, but this is going to take forever. This is like wearing down bone with a file.”

She gave a small smile.

The stars fell.

But just before they did, someone stood in front of her.

With their back to her, *someone held their right hand up toward the heavens as if to protect Othinus.* As if using a sturdy umbrella, that one spot was protected from the stars raining down.

That lone girl opened her one eye wide in surprise. She could not believe what she was seeing.

The boy spoke while still staring up into the heavens.

“You knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what?”

“You knew this would happen!! You achieved victory in every possible way and you could have created any world you wanted, but you conceded it all to me for some reason. You abandoned your ideal to save me and you knew the entire world would attack you in exchange!! You kept quiet about that and saved me!!”

“So what if I did?" muttered Othinus with a self-deprecating smile. “Either way, I won’t last much longer.”

“What?”

“I was creating the lance in order to control my power as a Magic God. But then Ollerus used the fairy spell he had developed in secret. At first, I used that to control my power in the negative direction to create another form of a Magic God. And I succeeded. At first, anyway.”

“What...are you saying?”

“An improvised method doesn’t ensure your safety. I could feel the cracks gradually running through the inside of my body. I could not use the lance and the fairy spell at the same time.”

Kamijou looked down at Othinus’s chest.

At the end in that pitch-black world, she had opened her other possibility as a Magic God by using the great scar of the fairy spell.

If that was making her suffer and he could negate that sort of spell with his right hand...

“It is too late.” Othinus spoke quietly from the ground. “It has already wreaked havoc inside my body. Even if you negate the stake with your right hand, the pain will not vanish. I will not conveniently return to being a mere human.”

She could not be saved.

Sooner or later, the good will and justice of the world would slowly devour her in her powerless state.

“Hurry and go,” she spat out while collapsed on the ground. “The coalition army you all prepared will soon attack as planned. I am slowly losing my power as a Magic God. With the entire world after me, I will eventually meet my end somewhere. There is no need for you to come with me. That would remove all meaning from returning you here.”

“But what will you do?”

A voice responded to her.

Painfully enough, that was the voice of the one who understood her enough to have taken her dream from her.

“You’re different now, right!? You need to atone for what you did and that might take a long time, but this is wrong. I no longer sense any evil in you that warrants killing you like this!!”

“You really are stupid. What good would it do to throw me in a prison cell? The official members of Gremlin would never accept it if I surrendered now. They would destroy even the strongest cell and hold me up as their symbol once more. The world’s leaders wish for a break from this chaos, so they do not want a repeat of all this. If they know I will simply be taken away, they will not imprison me in the first place. Killing me would provide more certain peace of mind.”

She had nowhere to run.

There was no safe place.

After all, the entire world hated her. She had done enough to be treated that way and she had shown no reluctance to do so.

There was nowhere for her to run.

There was nowhere for her to hide.

This was the end. Othinus herself had accepted that fact. The people of earth would take her life on this day. They would celebrate that fact and they might even create a new holiday to commemorate the coming peace.

They would happily live in a world without her.

"Then..."

Othinus's thoughts were cut off by Kamijou Touma's voice.

The boy who understood her spoke in a voice that showed he could not tolerate that.

"*Then I will save you. Even if it means fighting the entire world!!*"

The entire world's hatred was focused on a single person.

That girl had been driven to the verge of death while all alone.

It may have started as something she deserved and the tragedy may have been a result of the world punishing people properly, but Kamijou Touma did not want to see the word "justice" causing someone to suffer like this.

He could not accept a future where people lived in peace after accepting a girl's slaughter with a smile.

It was not that anyone was at fault.

The Anglican Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the United States of America, France, Academy City, Ollerus, Fiamma of the Right, Birdway, Lessar, Misaka Mikoto, and Index were all blameless. None of them set up this situation for malicious reasons.

It was simply an issue of shifted timing.

There was an interruption of time that only Kamijou Touma and Othinus knew about.

She had changed.

Unless he could find a way of explaining all that and immediately bringing an end to the fighting, he would have to fight them, even if just for the moment.

He could not let the good will of Index and the others bring about unnecessary bloodshed.

The boy had longed for this place so much that he had said farewell to all the smiles in the world.

And now he turned his back on it once more.

But that was not because he did not understand its value.

In order to truly return there, Kamijou Touma gathered strength in his right fist and silently made up his mind in front of a battered girl.

Now, fight.

Clench your right fist to protect the life and smile of a single girl.

AFTERWORD

To those of you who bought one volume at a time, welcome back. To those of you who bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Ideally, every incident would end in a single volume and the only exception would be the occasional two-parter, but here we are at the middle of a three-parter. As you know if you have read the volume through to the end, the next volume will be a boss rush of all the monsters Kamijou has dealt with thus far!! You can look forward to seeing a high school boy's actions after he carelessly makes an enemy of the world for the sake of the troublesome circumstances of a single girl!!

Anyway, this volume was completely focused on the battle with Othinus. I was wondering what a battle with a god would be like. The simplest and flashiest method would have been to have her call in an army of the monsters and gods from her mythology, but then I wondered if keeping things simple was the way to go if it's supposed a battle against an existence known as a god.

As a result, I decided to smash both the chronology and understanding of the protagonist to pieces. I will be deeply moved if you felt you could never win against that.

On the other hand, simply writing a battle that leaves no hope is not enough, so I gave Kamijou a strategy that is based in a familiar concept. That is why I used RPGs and retro shooting games as examples. ...After all, this is a story of a lowly human challenging a god. Rather than a head-to-head competition of tricky logic, I thought having Kamijou bring out this "common" sort of thing with a serious expression would create a contrast between them that shows his high school boy side.

After repeating the loop for thousands or even tens of thousands of times, Kamijou has quickly reached the position of a martial arts master in a kung fu movie or an ancient little girl that speaks like an old woman. But I figure Kamijou's personality and manner of speech would stay the same even as an old man, so I had him make it through the entire thing with no real change there. Of course, if he was an old man and still acted so energetically, that might give him the position of a martial arts master in its own way.

And just as the Will said in the novel, this truly became the story of Kamijou fighting for his own sake.

Can Kamijou Touma never make any selfish demands?

He had to ask that question after being driven into quite an extreme situation. I thought I would show his human side in a story like this and I felt it was fine to finally show him crying, but what did you think?

I must thank my illustrator, Haimura-san, and my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. I used many different methods to destroy Kamijou's sense of good and evil and his comprehension, so the illustrations had to be really difficult. I am thankful that they stuck with me.

And I must thank all the readers. I was finally going to have a Magic God going all out, so I wanted to have a type of battle you couldn't see otherwise. What did you think? I just hope you enjoyed it.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Okay, everyone. It's time to see a truly lovestruck blonde-haired, green-eyed goddess.

-Kamachi Kazuma